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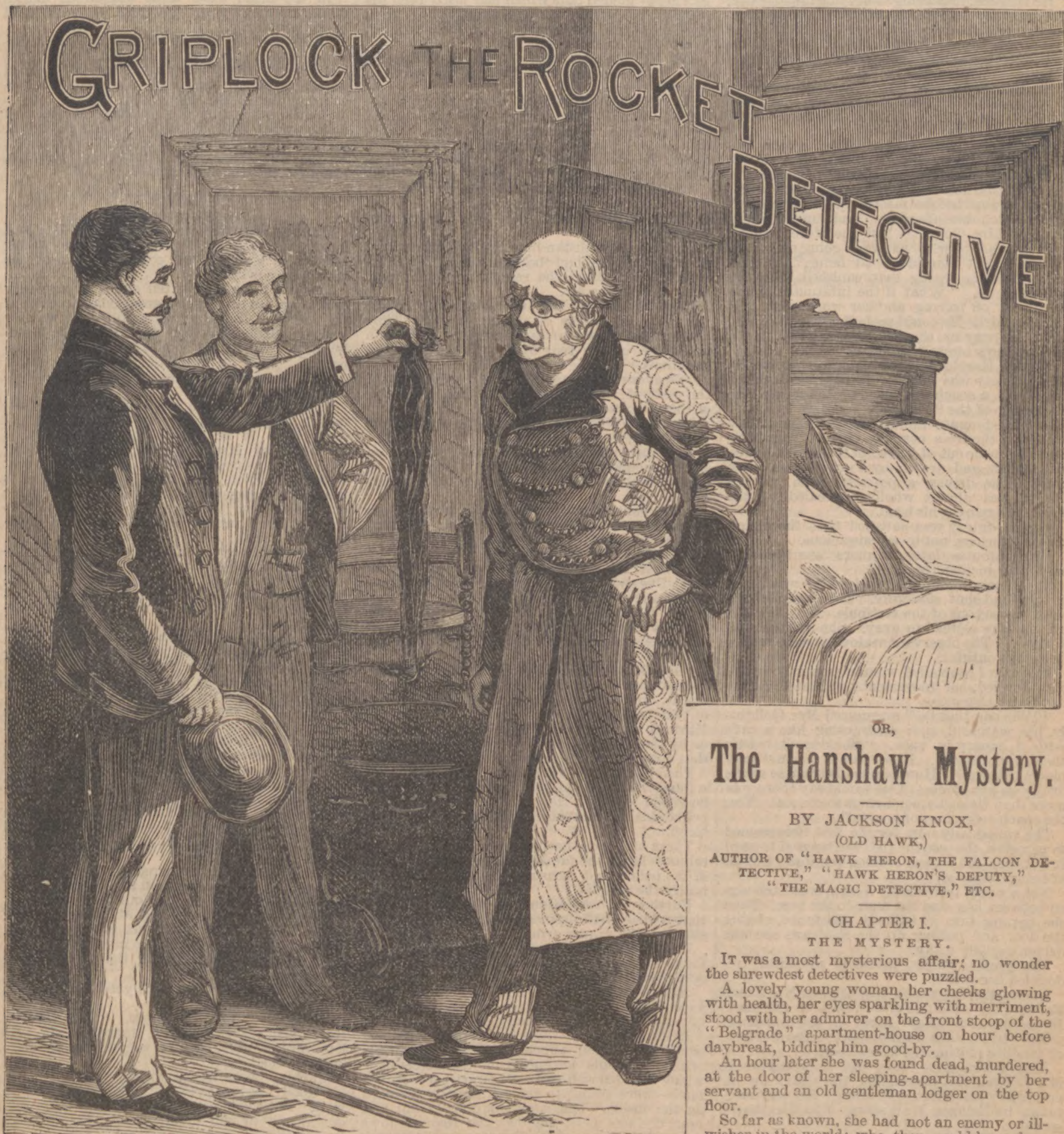
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DRAWING FROM HIS BOSOM THE SEVERED TRESS, THE ROCKET DETECTIVE DANGLED ITS SHIMMERING BEAUTY BEFORE THE ASTONISHED LAWYER'S EYES.

OR, The Hanshaw Mystery.

BY JACKSON KNOX,
(OLD HAWK.)

AUTHOR OF "HAWK HERON, THE FALCON DETECTIVE," "HAWK HERON'S DEPUTY,"
"THE MAGIC DETECTIVE," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE MYSTERY.

It was a most mysterious affair; no wonder the shrewdest detectives were puzzled.

A lovely young woman, her cheeks glowing with health, her eyes sparkling with merriment, stood with her admirer on the front stoop of the "Belgrade" apartment-house on hour before daybreak, bidding him good-by.

An hour later she was found dead, murdered, at the door of her sleeping-apartment by her servant and an old gentleman lodger on the top floor.

So far as known, she had not an enemy or ill-wisher in the world; who, then, could have done the deed? This was the mystery the detectives were so anxious to solve.

Miss Arabella Hanshaw was a lovely blonde of twenty-six or seven. She was the owner of the fashionable apartment-house, in which she occupied, with a servant, the second floor and was possessed of other property. She had inherited the greater part of her estate from an uncle, an unscrupulous stock broker, who was thought to have accumulated it by dishonest practices. She was an orphan, without relatives, so far as known. These circumstances had served to bar her entrance to the so-called "best society." But her reputation was irreproachable, and she had many masculine admirers.

One of these, Mr. Harold Markoe, was the companion from whom she had separated at the door of the "Belgrade," to be seen no more alive by any one save her assassin.

Markoe was a young man about town, of an excellent family. He could afford a life of leisure, was more of a dandy than a dude, and a good fellow withal. A healthy and wealthy orphan, he was, for the time being, greatly infatuated with Miss Hanshaw.

The young couple had just returned from a private party. It was fresh October weather. They were gay and animated. Their voices at parting rung out merrily through the yet silent and deserted street.

The final adieus were exchanged. Miss Hanshaw passed into the vestibule, admitted herself by her night-key, and vanished.

Her companion had endeavored to detain her yet longer, but without success. When he reappeared on the stoop alone, he seemed, by the light of a near street-lamp, to be flushed, but not angry.

He laughed, muttering something impatiently. Then, hastily descending the steps, he disappeared around the street corner on which the "Belgrade" was situated. That side of the house was heavily shadowed, and he did not reappear.

His failure to do so was a disappointment to a woman who had been covertly watching and listening through the window-blinds of a flat directly opposite.

This was a pretty, young widow, a Mrs. Golightly, formerly a friend of Miss Hanshaw's, but latterly on cool terms with her. Suffice it to say that Markoe had been an admirer of the pretty widow before meeting Miss Hanshaw, after which his allegiance had undergone a change. Mrs. Golightly had, therefore, been all eyes and ears to what had been going on.

"That isn't Harold's road home," she commented, as the young man vanished amid the side-shadows. "What if the infatuated puppy were bent on having another word with that forward girl! He *could* scale the rear wall, and make his way up the fire escape. Well, well; he may show himself again."

Though Harold did not reappear, the watcher's curiosity was not unrewarded, for half an hour later, a coach was heard to stop somewhere at the side of the "Belgrade."

It started again almost instantly, and drew up under the trees near the corner. But little could be made out of it, except that the equipage was stylish, and drawn by a gray and a dark horse. The driver, a powerful man, not in livery, was almost wholly concealed by the thick foliage over his head.

Mrs. Golightly was satisfied that the coach was mysterious, not to say suspicious.

Five minutes later, a more unmistakably suspicious incident occurred.

The street door of the "Belgrade" was heard to open and shut stealthily. Then a *veiled woman* stepped out of the vestibule. Hat, veil and all, she was clothed in gray. She was tall and willowy. The observant widow likewise set her down as youthful.

In spite of the veiled woman's manner, which was flurried, her movements indicated refinement and elegance.

"Who can that be?" murmured Mrs. Golightly, her watchful eyes contracting like a cat's with a canary in view. "She doesn't belong there, I'm certain. Bless me! if I could only pierce that veil! How her hands tremble as she draws on her gloves! One would say there was more than those diamond rings to conceal. Yes; the coach is for her, of course!"

The veiled lady now for the first time seemed to perceive the coach, and she hurried toward it. As she did so, she seemed painfully fearful of being observed.

Not a word, but merely a sign, was exchanged between her and the man on the box. Then she sprang into it without assistance, closing the door and pulling up the shades as she was driven rapidly away.

The pretty widow, intensely mystified, redoubled her watch.

One of the Belgrade's tenants was Mr. Jacob Farwell, an eccentric and well-to-do old man. He occupied a single room on the top floor, whose other rooms accommodated the servants of families renting the lower floor.

Yet, half-an-hour later, just after daybreak, Mr. Farwell was descending the stairs for his customary constitutional stroll. He was overtaken by Bridget McWaters, Miss Hanshaw's servant.

An appalling revelation was in store for them, on the second floor. At an open door,

leading from the main passage into the private hall, they found the dead body of Miss Hanshaw.

The servant made the discovery first, and rushed, with a horrified cry to throw herself beside the remains.

Mr. Farwell, inexpressibly shocked, recoiled to the rear of the passage. Here, in a dazed, mechanical way, without knowing why he did it, he examined the window looking out on the fire-escape. It was closed and securely fastened on the inside. Like one in a nightmare, he then found himself standing over the lifeless body, with the servant sobbing beside it. He had secretly cherished an old man's worship for Miss Hanshaw. The shock of thus finding her dead was stunning at first. Then he stooped to raise the motionless form, but instantly drew back with a shudder. His hands were reddened with blood!

There was his angel, the youthful goddess of his senile adoration, dead in her beauty and her bloom—murdered by repeated dagger-thrusts, and weltering in her blood.

Mr. Farwell, by a great effort, nerved himself to making a closer examination.

The body was partly disrobed and still warm. Life, indeed, could not have been extinct for more than thirty or forty minutes. The eyes were wide and staring. The face upturned to the early light, was distorted. The right arm of the corpse was greatly swollen—perhaps broken or half-twisted from the socket by the assassin in the preliminary struggle. A thick tress, clipped close to the scalp, was missing from amid the loose-falling, glistening mass of gloriously golden hair which had justly been the wearer's pride in life. It seemed to have been roughly severed and carried off by the murderer, as a trophy of his fiendish work.

Old Mr. Farwell made these frightful discoveries in far less time than it has taken to describe them.

He was about rushing away to give the alarm, when a certain object—the blood-stained weapon of death—caught his attention. It lay on the floor, partly concealed by the victim's skirt. It was a long, slender poniard of antique workmanship, with a richly-jeweled hilt.

"Look! the instrument of the murder!" he faltered to the still sobbing domestic. "But, don't touch it! Remain here till I can summon the police!"

As yet, notwithstanding Bridget's first cry, no other inmate had been aroused. Mr. Farwell hurried down the remaining stair-flight, out into the open air.

In doing so, he had to unlock and unbolt the inside fastenings of the street-door. They had evidently been no more tampered with than had those of the rear window he had already examined.

"Heavens!" he gasped, as he rushed out of the vestibule; "the murderer is, then, an inmate of the 'Belgrade!'"

Mrs. Golightly was still on the watch from the opposite flat.

The appearance of Mr. Farwell, with whom she was acquainted in a neighborly way, was so ghastly that she could no longer contain herself.

"Mr. Farwell, whatever is the matter?" she cried out, while throwing open her shutters. "You look as if you had seen a ghost!"

He looked over at her wildly.

"Ghost!" he echoed, in a hollow voice. "Great God! I've seen something worse. Miss Hanshaw—that angel—has been murdered!"

Mrs. Golightly gave a scream. Still, after the first shock, the mystery of the thing overcame the sentiments of horror and pity in her mind.

"Murdered!" she exclaimed, while withdrawing into her apartment. "Then just mark my words, Mr. Farwell! She was murdered by one of two persons. It was either by Mr. Harold Markoe, who separated from her an hour ago, or by the veiled woman who drove away from that door in a coach half an hour later!"

The old gentleman kept his dazed glance fixed a moment longer on the window at which she had been sitting. He then hurried away to a police-station that stood midway in the same block.

There his revelations were soon made. A few minutes later, the fatal premises were in charge of the police, and measures had been taken to notify the coroner.

Further investigation on the spot showed that robbery had supplemented, if it had not instigated, the graver crime.

The murdered woman's bed-chamber was found to be in confusion, as though it had been systematically ransacked.

At first, there seemed not the slightest clew. Indeed, it looked as if there were no possibility of fastening suspicion on any one.

Every means, by which a felonious entrance could have been effected into the building—with the single exception of the street door which Mr. Farwell had temporarily left on the latch—were found to be still securely fastened on the inside. The basement doors, front and rear, the basement windows, the rear windows communicating with the fire-escape all the way up, even the trap in the roof and the covering

to the coal-hole, were minutely and successively examined. All were found alike secured.

Neither could an entrance have been obtained at any one of the side-windows by means of the shade-trees.

It seemed self-evident that the crime could only have been committed by a regular inmate of the house.

But the other tenants, on being questioned by the authorities, proved to be eminently respectable and estimable families, whose horror over the affair was obviously sincere. Their servants, three in number, occupying sleeping-rooms on the fifth floor, were unsophisticated, terror-stricken young women, whose innocence would have been apparent to the most suspicious inquisitor. The bereavement and grief of Bridget McWaters were wholly beyond simulation. No more could suspicion attach to Mr. Farwell.

The police captain in charge summoned a cloud of detectives to his aid.

They scratched their heads, chewed or smoked knowingly, button-holed each other in corners, nosed about here and there, and looked preternaturally secret, owl-like wise, but were as much at fault as he.

No entrance could have been effected by an outside assassin, yet suspicion refused to rest on any one in the building.

Who, then, was the murderer?

The captain admitted the question to be a puzzler. The detectives called it a "corker."

However, soon after the arrival of the coroner, a gleam of light—zigzag and uncertain, but still a gleam—seemed to penetrate the mystery.

In the mean time, those ubiquitous individuals, the newspaper reporters, were on hand bright and early.

The detectives had already secured the testimony, such as it was, of old Mr. Farwell and the servant. But the reporters were beforehand with them in gaining access to a yet more interesting witness—Mrs. Golightly.

It was such a nine days' wonder as she had never mixed with before, and she was, by sex and nature, loquacious. The result was a boon for the news-gatherers of the afternoon journals, if not for the coroner's inquest.

CHAPTER II.

THE TWO FRIENDS.

HAROLD MARKOE was discussing a late and lonely luncheon at his club when the waiter laid before him the first edition of one of the afternoon newspapers.

The first thing his eye fell on, as he carelessly took it up, was a highly sensational account of the murder. Inexpressibly agitated, he was for some moments only able to master the headlines, in which the victim's name alone appeared. Then he gradually read the details. As he did so, his face painfully paled and reddened by turns.

"Oh, Lord!" he muttered; "how *could* they have got my name mixed up with this? Ah, I see! Here it is: 'From information kindly furnished by Mrs. Golightly, a comely young widow living opposite, eh?' The devil fly away with her! Poor, poor Bella! My God! and it must have happened within half an hour after our parting at her own door. And now to think of her lying there, cold, murdered, mutilated! Terrible! mysterious! appalling!"

He leaned his forehead on his hand, and powerful emotions shook his frame. His embarrassment almost equaled his sense of honor. While permitting himself to become temporarily infatuated with Arabella Hanshaw, he had never really loved her. In fact, his heart was given, his hand pledged, to *another*. But he had found her one of the prettiest and most entertaining young women he had ever met.

Manlike and selfish, the thought of his own predicament soon became uppermost.

"It will kill me socially—I shall never hear the last of it!" he exclaimed to himself. "And then—Oh, Lord! the thought is torture!—what will Helen think? She will never forgive my flirting with another girl—never! How can I blame her if she won't? This is awful! What shall I do?"

He ordered a brandy and soda, instead of his usual glass of sherry. Then, still unstrung, he set himself to thinking as rationally as his excitement would admit.

Suddenly an idea occurred to him, which he clutched, as a drowning man at a straw.

"Willis must help me out!" he muttered. "He has successfully played at detective work before this. Here is his chance to help a friend, while unraveling this horrible mystery!"

He hastily arose, thrusting the newspaper in his pocket.

"Has Mr. Hawley lunched yet?" he inquired, of the waiter.

"Yes, sir," was the reply. "Mr. Hawley went away just before you stepped in, sir. He left word, though, that he would meet you here at two o'clock, sir."

Markoe consulted his watch.

"Good!" he muttered. "Only ten minutes to wait. But the inquest takes place at four; and of course they will summon me. Plague take it! but Willis *must* help me out. I shall be in the smaller parlor expecting Mr. Hawley," he

added aloud, turning to the attendant. "Don't let him miss seeing me for the world."

He then passed into the room he had indicated, there to await the arrival of his friend with growing anxiety.

Willis Hawley and Harold Markoe were inseparable friends. The former was a young gentleman of moderate fortune, who had successively and unsuccessfully tried by turns to be a lawyer, a doctor, a novelist, a journalist, a politician and a juggler. He had then tried his hand at amateur detective work, from a pure love of unraveling mysteries.

This he had pursued with such success that he had often been heard to deplore, half-comically, his very inheritance, as having kept him out of the only professional career in which he could at the same time have made his mark and found congenial employment.

He was about Harold's own age, and outwardly quite as much of an exquisite as he. But, in reality, he was of sterner stuff. Under his fashionable exterior, there was a frame of iron, the muscles of a trained athlete, an incisive, analytical intelligence, and an immense reserve-force of persistent application and dogged will-power.

He was as cool as a veteran and as gritty as a game-cock. He could be, on occasion, as mobile as a pantomimist or as impassive as a tobacco-nist's wooden Indian. He had, moreover, a dry humor of his own. This trait, with his constitutional good-humor, made him a great favorite with his acquaintances.

This was the manner of man whom Harold Markoe awaited with so much anxiety and impatience.

When Willis Hawley at last presented himself, therefore, Harold could hardly refrain from rushing into his arms.

"Have you seen the evening papers?" cried the latter, eagerly.

"Not one of them, but I know all about it, my boy," said Willis composedly. "Fact is, that's why I left word for you with Thomas. Tut, tut! Do you forget that I am thick with every police reporter in New York?"

But, Harold sat down again with a hopeless air.

"What will Helen Whitback think of me?" he groaned.

"Come, cheer up, my boy!" said his friend, with much heartiness. "What will she do? Why, she'll forgive and sympathize with you, like the noble girl I know her to be—though, candidly, you hardly deserve it."

"I know I don't."

"Never mind that. Am I not her cousin, besides? In the mean time, this will be an additional incentive for us both to hunt down the murderer of poor Arabella Hanshaw. From this time forth, I am not only your friend, but the accredited detective in this case."

Harold stared.

"Sure as you live, my boy!" continued the other, complacently. "Politics did it! Oh, at last I'm in my natural element. Pinkerton's record will be nowhere! After settling this mystery, I shall be the hunkiest planet—the Jupiter—of the whole lynx-eyed galaxy! At present, I'm content to be a rising star—a mere twinkler, if you choose, but none the less a star."

"But are you in earnest?"

"In dead earnest, my boy! Now I must be off for Police Headquarters for my badge and authorization! And you shall be my assistant, Harold—my deputy, my apprentice! Aha! but we'll worm our way to the bottom of the Belgrade mystery!"

His voice and manner had waxed enthusiastic. He was fairly rubbing his hands, when an attendant entered to say that a policeman was without, requesting to see Mr. Markoe.

"Bring him right in here!" cried Hawley, answering for his client, as Harold might now be termed. "Trot him in!"

"I suppose it's a summons to attend the inquest," said Harold, languidly reaching out his hand as the officer entered.

The latter, who knew the young man by name and reputation, hesitated.

"Not exactly, Mr. Markoe," said he, at last. "Fact is, sir, I'm sorry, but I've got a Headquarters warrant for your arrest, taken out by the coroner. But you're first to accompany me to the inquest."

Harold leaped to his feet.

"My arrest?" he repeated. "Good heavens! wasn't it enough to be named in connection with the accursed affair? They can't suspect me of having murdered Arabella Hanshaw!"

"There's only a suspicious circumstance, I understand, sir, that can doubtless be explained away," replied the officer. "But my orders are imperative."

"Leave it all to me," interposed Willis, in his business-like way. "We'll all take a hack to Headquarters, and on the road, Harold, we'll just pick up your relative, Civil Justice Penniman. After that, hey for the 'Belgrade!' Ah! if this would only turn out another Mary Rogers mystery—or, still better, a genuine, real-life Rue Morgue case, with another orang-outang for the delusive criminal to be run to earth—wouldn't the young detective be in the ascendant—soar up like a rocket!"

"And Rocket Detective you will be if you can throw light upon the darkness of this terrible tragedy," added the policeman, earnestly.

CHAPTER III.

THE JEWELLED DAGGER.

JUDGE PENNIMAN'S services were secured, and the business at Police Headquarters effected with dispatch.

All eyes were turned on Harold as, accompanied by his friends and the policeman, he entered the crowded room in which the inquest was being held.

This was the handsome front room, or parlor, of the suit Miss Hanshaw had occupied.

The remains of the murdered girl were reposing in an expensive uncovered coffin, at one side of the room.

Among the many present was a lawyer, Mr. Sharp, who had attended to Miss Hanshaw's business.

The investigation was already under way. A jury had been obtained; the physician had made his report, particularizing the wounds by which the victim had met her death; and the first witness, Mr. Jacob Farwell, was being examined.

This witness, who was greatly affected, merely testified to details with which the reader is already familiar.

The two policemen who had taken charge of the premises followed. They testified simply to the disturbed condition of the sleeping apartment, and to their having found all avenues of entrance and egress belonging to the entire building (with the exception already noted), securely fastened on the inside.

Then Mr. Sharp, who had taken charge of the remains, testified to his business relations with the deceased. Miss Hanshaw had had no relatives by blood, that he was aware of, since she had succeeded to her uncle's estate, four years before. Her jewelry was very valuable, and she had also been accustomed to keep a large sum of ready money in her dressing-case. This property, together with a large portion of her expensive wardrobe, had disappeared. Robbery had, therefore, he opined, instigated the murder. But he was at a loss to imagine why the lock of hair had been severed and carried off.

Thus far, nothing had been officially elicited concerning the mysterious veiled woman, or Harold, as having last been seen in Miss Hanshaw's company; but Bridget McWaters, the servant, and Mrs. Golightly were yet to be heard from.

The testimony of the former may be summarized as follows:

During the last five days of Miss Hanshaw's life, she had kept her bedchamber jealously closed under lock and key. This was the chamber directly back of the parlor in which the inquest was going on. It had two doors, one of its own leading into the private hall, the other communicating with the parlor. Both these Miss Hanshaw had suddenly locked after her, one morning, upon coming out of her chamber. Thenceforth she had constantly retained the keys in her possession, while frequently enjoining witness against attempting to enter or spy into the room, under pain of instant dismissal. She had even performed her own chamber work every morning thereafter. Witness had thought the interdiction an odd one, but had never thought of accounting for or disregarding it. It was only after Miss Hanshaw's death that, during those five days, witness had ventured into the interdicted chamber. Then, the door having doubtless been left open by Miss Hanshaw herself, just prior to her fatal struggle with her assassin, witness had entered it with the policemen. It had been found topsy-turvy, but affording no indication whatever of the reason for which it had been guarded so jealously.

This piece of testimony caused a decided sensation. This was immeasurably increased by a strangely hollow voice, coming from no one could say exactly where, but apparently from overhead, that suddenly rung out like a trumpet.

"What if the murderer had issued from that very chamber?" it shouted. "What if Miss Hanshaw had harbored him there from danger or pursuit? Ha, ha, ha! A serpent's gratitude!"

Every one gave an alarmed start, the witness especially.

"Who hollered out them words?" roared the coroner's deputy, who was nothing if not a politician. "Is there a telephone connected with this apartment?"

No; apparently there was not; nor could any one account for the unaccountable voice. The witness then resumed, though now with a sort of superstitious awe added to her sense of bewilderment.

The rest of Bridget McWaters's evidence bore more directly upon the murder. On the preceding night, a veiled lady had called, asking for Miss Hanshaw. This was at ten o'clock, soon after Miss Hanshaw's quitting the house in Mr. Markoe's company. On being informed of this, the veiled visitor, in spite of witness's opposition, had insisted on awaiting the lady's return in the parlor. Midnight arriving, without Miss Hanshaw coming home, witness had peremptorily demanded the visitor's retirement

from the premises. The veiled woman had thereupon produced a note in Miss Hanshaw's handwriting, authorizing her to remain. The wording of the note was so explicit, though brief, and the writing so evidently that of Miss Hanshaw, that witness had reluctantly acquiesced in its implied instructions. She had accordingly gone off up-stairs to bed, locking the doors behind her, and leaving the veiled woman alone in the parlor.

"What was the veiled woman like, as near as you could judge?" asked the coroner at this point.

"Av coorse, I c'u'dn't shpy her faytures—she niver so much as raised the tip av her veil," was the response. "But she seemed a rale lady, an' young at that—slinder an' shapely. Her veil, gown an' hat, fedder an' all, was, that gray, sor—as gray as a gray cat in the gloamin', sor! When she spoke at all at all, it was in short words, but wid a swateness in the voice av her."

"What was her manner?"

"Narvous in the extreme, sor. She was alwus pullin' at the tips av her gloves, as if the devil was in them, an' givin' inexpectid shtarts. But for her rale lady-likeness, I'd hev tuk her for a mannyac, sure!"

"Should you meet her again, would you be able to identify her by what you remember of her figure, voice and manner?"

"Is it shpottin' her as the same you mane, sor? Sure, an' I w'u'd."

And the witness, who had mingled heartfelt sobs with her testimony, looked eagerly and even expectantly about the room.

The coroner asked but one more question.

"Would the veiled lady, in your opinion, have been physically capable of inflicting the injuries causing your mistress's death?"

"Sure, an' I can't say, sor! It's thim slinder an' illigant colleens that is often as tough as bog-oak an' wiry as wolves. But thin, as for shtabbin' me poor young mistress troo an' troo, besides twistin' the arrum av her oot av the socket, an' robbin' the lovely hair from her shealp—Och, murther, sor! 'twas the dade av a devil, not av woman or mon!"

A great outburst of grief wound up honest Bridget's testimony.

The note which the veiled lady had given her, was then produced. It was as follows:

"THE BELGRADE, Oct. 4, 18—

"MADAM:—If I am not at home when you call, be sure to wait for me.

"Our business can be no longer deferred.

"A. HANSHAW."

Mr. Farwell, Mr. Sharp and Harold Markoe, were the only persons present, besides Bridget McWaters, who were familiar with Miss Hanshaw's handwriting. They all unhesitatingly pronounced the writing genuine.

"Did the veiled woman take this note out of an envelope before giving it to you?" Willis Hawley inquired of Bridget McWaters.

"Yis, sor," was the reply.

"What became of that envelope?"

The witness did not know. The veiled woman might have put it back in her bosom or thrown it away.

"That was unfortunate," commented the Rocket Detective, "for the veiled woman's name and address were doubtless on the envelope." And he added, in a low voice, to Harold: "If we could only find that tell-tale envelope, my boy! 'Twould be plain sailing after that."

Mrs. Golightly was next called. Glib and imaginative as she was, she had really nothing of importance to tell as the result of her observations, save the departure from the house of the veiled woman, her description of whom tallied with that of the servant. Her partial description of the equipage was alone new, but she knew no more of the veiled woman's identity than did the preceding witness, if as much. She could merely certify that the veiled woman had got into the coach about half an hour before Mr. Farwell's horror-stricken appearance, fresh from the ghastly discovery, and consequently about half an hour after Harold's separation from Miss Hanshaw at the street door.

She very naturally made the most of this latter episode. She described everything she had seen and heard with malicious minuteness.

It having come Harold's turn to testify, he described truthfully and succinctly the circumstances of his parting from Miss Hanshaw. After quitting the Belgrade, he said, he had gone home at once, though by a somewhat roundabout way.

To his unexpected dismay, he was listened to with coldness, not to say with suspicion and incredulity.

Then the preceding witness, Mrs. Golightly, was recalled.

She was asked if, in her opinion, it would have been possible for Harold, after passing out of her sight around the street-corner, to have made his entrance into Miss Hanshaw's apartments from the rear. With snapping eyes, the witness answered that it would have been clearly possible. He could easily have scaled the area wall, in the shadow of the trees, and made his way into the second-floor main passage by means of the fire-escape and rear window.

The expression of this opinion made a great

sensation. Harold, however, treated it with the contempt it deserved, as did his friends.

"This is a point to be gravely weighed," said the coroner, after consulting with the police captain, who sat near him.

"What point, Mr. Coroner?" asked Willis, rising. "Will you please explain *how* it would have been possible for this to have been effected?"

"Why not?" demanded the coroner, bristling up.

"Because the window was found fastened on the inside!"

"Still he could have did it," called out the deputy, as his superior hesitated. "He could have shinned through when it was open, fastened it behind him, and then skipped out by the front door."

"But that was found by Mr. Farwell to be likewise fastened securely on the inside!"

There was a giggle over the deputy's discomfiture, when the coroner angrily commanded silence.

"There is something else to be put in in evidence on this point," said he, rising impressively. "It is this."

He held up the jeweled dagger.

There was a fresh sensation. This was increased by Harold, who, at sight of the weapon, uttered an exclamation, and changed color visibly.

The coroner went on slowly and sternly, while noting the effect of his words on the young man.

"This is the weapon," he continued, "with which the wounds, causing the death of Arabella Hanshaw were unquestionably inflicted. It is an antique weapon, richly jeweled, cunningly chased, and, moreover, defaced by the blood of the unhappy victim. But, amid all this, there likewise appears on the blade a modern inscription, clearly, distinctly legible. That inscription is a man's name. That name is Harold L. Markoe!"

This announcement proved the sensation of the investigation.

Even Judge Penniman seemed to shrink instinctively from his young relative's side, while Willis Hawley himself turned suddenly and regarded him with astonishment, almost with suspicion.

Harold had turned perfectly livid, and was panting like some hunted animal.

CHAPTER IV. THE VAILED LADY.

By an immense effort, however, the young man (thus, for an instant, it would seem, with an awful crime brought home to him) speedily recovered his self-possession.

"Mr. Coroner and gentlemen of the jury," said he, rising with dignity, "it was supreme astonishment, and that only, which produced the momentary ghastliness I feel I must have betrayed."

"Do you acknowledge the ownership of this weapon, sir?" asked the coroner, sternly.

"Assuredly, Mr. Coroner," was the reply, now thoroughly collected. "It is a rare old Venetian poniard. I bought it in Paris three years ago, as an addition to my collection of such relics, in which I am something of a connoisseur. I afterward had my name engraved on the blade, as a surer means of identification in case of its being lost or stolen. For, though rare, the weapon is not unique."

"How do you account for its having been used in this murder?"

"I don't attempt to account for it at all. My lodgings were robbed during my absence, night before last, and that dagger, together with similar objects of art, was abstracted from them."

The coroner shook his head; the jury looked divided in their impressions, and murmurs of incredulity rose from different parts of the room.

Harold coolly looked about him, and remarked the presence of two other police captains. With one of them he exchanged a nod of recognition.

"Pray don't be over-hasty, gentlemen," said the young man, quietly. "I might readily corroborate my statement by sending for the domestics and others in the house where I lodge. Captain McKelway," he added, addressing the officer he had recognized, "will you oblige me by examining the weapon in evidence, and telling what you know about it?"

Captain McKelway did as he was requested.

"I never saw this weapon before," said he, scrutinizing the dagger. "But I can testify to Mr. Markoe having been robbed of it at the time he has stated. Mr. Markoe resides in my precinct. Night before last, shortly before midnight, he came to the station and reported his loss to both myself and the sergeant on duty. A little later, I examined his premises. There were abundant evidences of the burglary. Mr. Markoe was particularly distressed over the loss of this dagger. He described it to me so minutely, I would identify it among a hundred others."

"Here is an extraordinary combination of circumstances!" exclaimed the coroner, sententially.

Captain McKelway shrugged his shoulders.

"Just so," said he. "The thief who stole Mr.

Markoe's Venetian dagger is doubtless the murderer of Miss Hanshaw. That is all there is about it. Mr. Coroner, it seems to me that Mr. Markoe is needlessly in custody."

The captain then shook hands with Harold, and resumed his seat.

There was a stir of surprise, if not of relief, throughout the room.

The coroner lost no time in discharging Harold from custody, and making a suitable apology, whereupon Judge Penniman, Mr. Sharp and Willis Hawley congratulated the young man.

"Gad!" whispered Willis; "but the reappearance of that jeweled dagger of yours as the murderer's tool is a wonderful coincidence, my boy! Why did you never tell me of the robbery?"

"I cannot endure being either swindled or robbed without a sense of shame!" replied Harold, simply. "Besides, I hoped to recover my property without making my loss public."

The coroner, in summing up the evidence for the jury, was now glad enough to have it bear most heavily where it naturally rested—against the vailed lady. However, he could not but deplore the absence of all testimony as to the identity of that mysterious and interesting personage.

After submitting the case, he made the following remark:

"There is no doubt in my mind, however, that this mysterious vailed woman, this masked murderer, as we have thus far a right to assume her to be, will sooner or later be arrested by our vigilant detectives."

The jury, without leaving their seats, gave the only verdict possible in view of the evidence adduced. This was, "that the deceased, Arabella Hanshaw, had come to her death by murderous blows inflicted by some person or persons unknown to the jury."

Just here, a startling incident occurred. The verdict had no sooner been rendered than, as if in response to the coroner's last remark, a voice—the same as before, but this time shrill, piercing, almost unearthly—shrieked out from somewhere overhead:

"The vailed woman defies you! Your detectives! Ha, ha, ha! They will never find her while fire burns, water drowns and death destroys!"

Every one in the room now started up in real alarm.

Several officials made a movement to explore the apartments overhead, but before they could quit the room a tumult was heard in the passages and on the stairways. It was a tumult of hurrying feet and frightened voices. The voices were many and discordant, but all chorusing a single cry:

"Fire! fire! The Belgrade is on fire!"

The coroner and his deputy grabbed up their papers in a sort of despair, while a general rush was made for the door and windows.

"Well, I give in!" exclaimed the deputy. "For out and out surprises, this inquest takes the cake!"

Then he crammed down his hat over his eyes, and made common cause with the fugitives.

The police captain in charge was one of the few who retained their presence of mind.

"The fire must be above!" he shouted to his subordinates. "Keep these premises free from intrusion at any risk!"

The Rocket Detective, cool as an ice-box, was standing with Harold at one of the front windows.

"The deputy's farewell address wasn't out of the way," said he, with a laugh. "This beats the Dutch!"

"Whence could that startling voice and defiance have come?"

"How should I know?"

"It was like a screech out of the bottomless pit! Look! There are the fire-engines! And the deuce! what a crowd already! Sha'n't we be getting out of this?"

"Don't be nervous. Besides, there's the hook and ladder company."

But at this instant a terrible cry arose from the crowded street.

"There's a woman on the roof—a vailed woman!" was its purport. "She'll be burned to death!"

Willis dashed away at the tail end of the vanishing inquest attendants, with Harold close behind.

When they had forced their way through the outside crowd to a point from which they could look back and upward, they saw the roof and upper windows wrapped in smoke and flames.

Then they just caught a glimpse of a graceful female figure, swiftly, but composedly, making its way along the copings toward the adjoining roofs.

It was but a glimpse, yet sufficient to show them that the woman was clad in gray, and kept her face carefully concealed.

Then four of the great fire-engines suddenly got on their three-inch streams at one and the same time.

The figure disappeared in a volume of vapor and smoke, and it was evident that the fire would be confined to the upper story.

"Come! There's no time to be lost!" ex-

claimed Willis, dragging Harold away with him. "She has escaped the flames, but must come out from one of the houses along this block."

They shouldered their way out of the crowd, and then ran rapidly, narrowly observing the house-fronts on the same side of the street as the burning building, but without again seeing the vailed fugitive of the roofs.

"Too bad!" muttered Willis. However, we're on the trail."

But they had now reached the intersection of a great business avenue. In this there was a temporary block of vehicles and pedestrians, the tide of traffic having been obstructed by the excitement incidental to the neighboring fire.

While the two friends thus found themselves incommoded afresh, a ragged little girl was seen zigzagging swiftly toward them, in among the struggling horses and wheels, from the opposite side of the thoroughfare.

She reached the curb in safety, thrust a slip of paper into Harold's hand, and disappeared almost at the same instant.

"A love-message!" commented Willis, a little bitterly. "Harold, you have made a conquest." "More important than that!" exclaimed Harold, raising an astonished face from the perusal of the slip. "Read it!"

Willis snatched the missive. It was written in pencil, evidently also in a disguised hand, and to the following effect:

"HAROLD MARKOE:—
As you value your peace of mind, even your very life, give over your search for
"THE VAILED LADY."

"By Jupiter!" cried the Rocket Detective; "is this woman a will-o'-the-wisp?"

A startled exclamation from his friend was his response.

Harold was staring at an object on the further side of the jammed and tangled thoroughfare, and Willis followed the direction of his eyes.

That object was evidently the sender of the note—a graceful young woman in an open barouche, which was turning off into a cross-street with much difficulty.

She was clad in gray from head to foot, including the veil that concealed her face, and she seemed to make the young men an angry or defiant sign.

"Come on!" cried Willis, dashing out amid the crush, with Harold at his heels. "The game's afoot! Now for the vailed woman!"

CHAPTER V. TRACKED AND LOST.

BUT the street tangle was embarrassing, and by the time they reached the opposite corner the open barouche with its vailed occupant was nearly two blocks away.

But a hansom cab was signaled, and the next minute Willis and Harold were in it.

The former had already indicated the object of pursuit to the driver, with instructions to keep it in sight at any cost, and away they dashed.

Fifty-sixth street was the one they were traversing, and the two friends, being seated before the driver, had quite as good an outlook as he.

The fugitive barouche, though going fast, was being rapidly overhauled, and they saw its occupant, after casting a look behind, lean forward, doubtless to urge greater speed on the part of her driver.

The speed of the barouche was redoubled, but still the hansom gained on it, until the intervening space had decreased to less than a block's length.

"Aha!" exclaimed the Rocket Detective, rubbing his hands; "we shall have her, my boy. The vailed gray murderess of Arabella Hanshaw is as good as nabbed. Hump her along, driver! There's a nice *pour-boire* for you, if you only overtake the—Hullo! be lively now. They've turned up Sixth avenue."

Such was the case, but the next instant the hansom also made a turn, and the vehicle chase was at an end, though not exactly to the satisfaction of the pursuers.

The barouche had come to a pause at the entrance of a large and expensive apartment house, "The Cavendish," but its occupant had vanished, and the driver was just gathering up his reins for a fresh start.

Willis and Harold were out of their cab in a trice.

"Did your fare go in there?" demanded Willis of the coachman, indicating the handsome entrance, and at the same time slipping him a tip.

"Yes, sir," was the response. "Can't more'n just stepped to the elevator. Thankee, sir. Get up!"

"Quick!" said Willis to Harold, while rewarding the cabman. "To the elevator!"

"Hold on!" said Harold, clutching his arm. "Look; this is the Cavendish."

"What of that?"

"Helen Whitback lives here."

"So she does. What of it? Queer coincidence, that's all. Hurry up!"

The elevator, as they reached it, was just coming down after a brief ascent.

"Here, boy, be lively!" whispered Willis, feeling the elevator boy as he hopped into the cage followed by his no less nervous companion.

"Start her up! Who was your last passenger?"

"Thank you, sir. A hurried young lady in a gray suit, with a veil over her face."

"What floor did she get off at?"

"Fourth."

"That's ours, too. Be quick."

Nevertheless, the friends stared at each other with fresh bewilderment as they stepped out at the fourth floor.

But two suits were on this floor, as they both familiarly knew, one being empty, the other occupied by Helen Whitback—Willis's cousin. Harold's fiancée—and her widowed mother.

"What the deuce?" muttered Willis, voicing the common thought of both as they hastened along the main passage. "But we shall see."

Both gentlemen were well known to the smiling servant who answered their summons at the private hall door pertaining to the Whitbacks' suit.

"Is Miss Helen at home, Mary?" asked Willis.

"Yes, sir; she just returned from making some visits. Please step in, and I'll tell her."

Just returned. The young men exchanged another bewildered glance.

"Tell me, Mary," said Willis, after a pause. "The other suit on this floor—is it still unoccupied?"

"Yes, sir."

"And locked?"

"Of course, sir. The rooms are only shown by the janitor on request."

"And Miss Helen, you say, is only just returned from visiting?"

"Yes, sir."

"You've admitted no one else within, say, ten minutes?"

"No, sir; not within two or three hours, for that matter."

Before putting the next question Helen's cousin exchanged a half-shame-faced look with Helen's betrothed—it seemed so much like an aspersion of her fair name—and yet the question was asked.

"You mustn't think odd of us to-day, Mary," said Willis. "Mr. Markoe and I are investigating a—a mystery."

"Yes, sir," and the young woman looked greatly interested.

"How was your young mistress dressed when you admitted her a few minutes ago?"

"The same she was on going out."

"Yes, yes; but how?"

"In a beautiful gray walking suit, sir."

In gray? What could it mean? Chance coincidences are not apt to tally in minute details. Will's next query was in a positively hollow voice, while Harold was beginning to look haggard.

"Was—was her face veiled?"

The girl broke into a laugh.

"What! in the house, sir?"

"But did she wear a veil?"

"Of course, sir. Miss Whitback always has a veil handy with her, in case the dust do be blowing."

"Mary," called out a sweet voice from the interior. "Who are you talking with?"

"With Mr. Hawley and Mr. Markoe, ma'm. They're here to see you."

With that, Mary ushered the decidedly dumfounded young men into the parlor, and left them there.

"What do you think of it all?" asked Willis, in a low voice.

"I don't know," was Harold's reply. "What do you think?"

"I haven't an idea."

"Good heavens! the bare possibility of Helen being mixed up!"

"Go slow!" cautioned Willis, as there was the rustle of a dress in the hall; "and leave it all to me."

They had barely time to compose themselves in a measure when Miss Whitback made her appearance.

She was a charming young woman, in whom agreeableness of expression, sweetness of manner and a singular purity of complexion, took the place of positive good looks, and she was tastefully attired in a dark blue reception dress, prettily trimmed.

"How glad I am to see you both!" she exclaimed, advancing with much cordiality to her cousin, but including Harold in her welcome with a certain shyness that might mean almost anything. "I had to keep you waiting in order to change my dress. You are almost strangers; I have not seen either of you for half-a-week."

Nothing could exceed the naturalness and composure of her manner.

"You—you had just returned home then?" said Willis, easily, after the interchange of commonplaces.

"Yes; some visits through the house here, that was all."

"Ah!" with an inner relief, which was shared by Harold to the utmost; "you were not out of doors then?"

"No; though I had dressed with the intention of doing some shopping. But mamma is not well—though well enough to see you presently, however—so I merely made some visits among friends above and below. But why do you ask?"

Harold, unable to meet her eyes, though the dearest to him in all the world, began to cough quite violently; but his companion, now thoroughly at ease, though no less mystified than he, was equal to the occasion.

"Harold and I are in something of a quandary," said Willis, gravely. "Let me ask first, my dear cousin, if you are in the habit of reading the evening papers." And he drew one from his pocket as he spoke, and began unfolding it.

"You ought to know that I am not," said Miss Whitback, beginning to grow puzzled in her turn. "A skimming of one a day, and that in the morning, is usually enough for me."

"Read that then," and he handed her the paper, with the conspicuous article in regard to Miss Hanshaw's murder uppermost. "It is not very agreeable reading, to be sure, but thereby hangs a tale."

As she read with a blanching cheek, Harold stood before her, his hands clasped, an appealing look in his eyes; everything else forgotten in the suspense as to how his circumstantial connection with the tragedy would affect him in her esteem.

She understood him.

"It is appalling!" was her comment, as she returned the paper to Willis. "Harold, do not look so disconsolate. Miss Hanshaw had told me all. Your flirtation with her has caused me some pain, but never to doubt your loyalty to me. Poor Arabella! Ah, it is too dreadful!"

"What!" gasped the young men, in a breath. "You—you knew Miss Hanshaw?"

"Yes, though only of late. I sought her—I—that is—" Miss Whitback's agitation was painful; "I may tell you more at some other time. Oh, this is awful!"

She half-rose from her chair, and then, partly turning, leaned her face on the back of it, with her handkerchief to her eyes.

In the published account, which was of course devoid of the particulars developed by the inquest, there was still sufficient mention of the veiled woman, etc., gathered from Mrs. Gollightly's gossip twaddle, to outline the main features of the mystery.

Both Willis and Harold had this in mind when the former, after waiting for Helen to recover from her emotion, said aloud, though in a half-abstracted way:

"Oh, that veiled woman in the gray suit—that gray woman with the veil! What a chase she has led us!"

Miss Whitback looked up quickly, with something like a sudden terror in her face and eyes.

"The veiled woman in gray!" she exclaimed, catching her breath. "What of her?"

"Why, didn't you read about her here?" said Willis, in surprise. "Who else but she can be guilty of the murder?"

She hastily repossessed herself of the paper, and re-read the article.

"True, true!" she said, in a low voice, but with recovered self-control. "This escaped me—I only took in the bare outline at first."

She looked at them slowly and scrutinizingly.

"Why are you here?" she continued.

"In search of that veiled woman in gray," said Willis, promptly. "Harold and I are sworn to track down Miss Hanshaw's murderer. We tracked the veiled woman, after an exciting street chase, to this very house; I might almost say, my dear cousin, to your very door."

A barely perceptible shiver passed over her, but that was all.

"To my door?" she repeated, wonderingly. "That is very strange, for I, too, wore a gray suit, with a veil, just before your arrival, though I had not been out of doors."

"So Mary informed us," said Willis; "and that is what mystifies us so greatly."

"No wonder. Then you came here direct from—"

"The inquest."

"Pray tell me about it, and omit not the slightest detail, I beseech you."

Willis obeyed. He had tried his hand at newspaper reporting, and would have excelled in the profession had he persevered. In fact, he could talk a report as glibly as he could write one. He crossed his legs, folded his hands, and a verbatim account of the coroner's investigation, to the minutest particular, flowed from his gifted lips with a glibness that called forth a smile from Harold, in spite of his distress of mind.

Miss Whitback listened with the intensest interest.

"So you are positive," said she, after a troubled pause, "that you tracked the mysterious veiled lady in gray to this house?"

"We are, indeed."

"Wait for me a few moments."

She quitted the room, and presently returned in her gray suit, but with the silvery veil pertaining to it uplifted.

"What do you think of me now?" she asked.

The young men were astounded.

"Pray put down your veil," said Willis.

She did so, the resemblance being then even more perfect.

"Helen, it's wonderful!" exclaimed Markoe. "I could have sworn it was yourself that led us such a chase."

"You are the veiled murderess's prototype," cried Hawley, with unusual excitement, "or her very self!"

Miss Whitback had raised her veil again, and she wheeled upon him in a sudden panic.

"The murderess herself! Me! You cannot mean it?" she gasped.

Willis laughed.

"Of course not," said he. "I alluded to the resemblance."

"This suit must evermore seem hateful to me," said Helen, composing herself. "Wait for me again. I hear my mother coming."

As she was again quitting the room, while her mother entered it, a paper, doubtless loosened from some receptacle in the bosom of the dress while making the change, slipped to the floor, unperceived by her.

Both young men saw it, but when Harold looked again it was gone.

Mrs. Whitback was a fragile, but still attractive lady of middle age, with a comfortable income and a predisposition to heart disease.

The visitors were too well-bred to afford her an inkling as to the odd circumstance that had prompted their visit; but when Helen returned again, which she did in a few minutes, she at once returned to the subject, saying that she would inform her mother as to its strange features, and hoping that she might be kept informed as to any developments in the case.

For all that, Willis made his adieux to his aunt and cousin with a strange preoccupation of manner, though Harold received a lingering touch of Helen's hand at parting that more than repaid him for the deserved suspense he had suffered.

"What an unfortunate entanglement for poor Helen that gray suit coincidence might have proved!" said Harold, when they were on their way to the street. "Don't you think so?"

"I don't know what to think."

There was such a pained inflection in Willis's reply that his friend stared at him.

"What do you mean?"

"Look at this!"

Willis held up the paper that had dropped out of the bosom of Helen's gray suit. It was an empty but addressed envelope, of the square shape then in fashionable vogue, and of a peculiarly delicate mauve shade.

"What is that?" said Harold.

"The paper that Helen dropped unperceived."

"Ah, I remember. But I did not see you pick it up."

"Have you forgotten my legerdemain skill? Examine the envelope."

Heavens!" exclaimed Harold, as he did so; "it is the missing envelope of the inquest."

"And addressed to Helen."

"Yes; and I moreover recognize this as the style and hue latterly used by Miss Hanshaw altogether."

"Yes."

"Do you think it contained the note of appointment handed to Bridget McWaters by the veiled woman in gray?"

"I do—I am compelled to."

"Which proves?"

"That there can be but one veiled woman in gray."

"And that woman?"

"Helen Whitback."

It was with a sort of groan—like an echo of Harold's anguish—that Willis pronounced the name, but he almost immediately added:

"However, it is not for us to incriminate Helen as a murderess on such circumstantial evidence, strong as it may seem. Let us hasten back, and ascertain the result of the mysterious fire."

As they were passing out of the Cavendish, they were overtaken by a man, who, with some diffidence of manner, ventured to accost them.

"If I am mistaken, gentlemen," said he, "pray excuse my addressing you; but were you not present at the Belgrade inquest a short time ago?"

CHAPTER VI.

A STRANGER FROM TEXAS.

THE two friends, thus accosted, turned to perceive an undersized, gentlemanly appearing man of middle age, with, however, a scarred, bronzed face, and piercing, coal-black, restless eyes, whose shiftiness of expression was the reverse of trust-inspiring.

A rather distant bow from each was the sole recognition that this individual's intrusion received, but he was not at all abashed.

"I see I am somewhat *de trop*, as the frog-eaters say," continued he, drawing back. "However, it doesn't much matter. Only I was also present at the inquest, and I was fool enough to suppose that my notion about the young lady's murder might be worth considering."

"I say, hold on, will you?" said Willis, scenting a possible chance for information. "We were naturally surprised by the suddenness of your interruption, but nothing cavalierly is meant by either of us."

"Glad to hear it, for I'm from a part of the country where men are more free and easy with each other than hereabouts."

As he spoke, he politely tendered his card, which read, "Jefferson Hardman, Railroad Detective, Texarkana, Texas."

"Ah, much obliged, I am sure," commented Willis, after exchanging a glance with Harold. "Ur—yes, Mr. Hardman, you are right about having seen us at the inquest. The fact is, we are just on our way back to the Belgrade, to find out the result of that extraordinary fire that wound up the investigation so unexpectedly."

"I'll save you the trouble of retracing your steps," said Mr. Hardman. "The fire, after slightly damaging the upper floors, didn't amount to much. All is quiet again, and Mr. Sharp, the murdered young woman's lawyer, is in charge of the premises. Will you join me in a drink?"

New York young gentlemen, though less reserved than Bostonians, do not unhesitatingly accept invitations to drink from perfect strangers, save under unusual circumstances.

"Thank you, but— isn't it a little close on to the dinner hour?" said Willis, smiling; and then he asked abruptly:

"Will you vouchsafe to explain the accident by which my friend and I are indebted to—ur—your acquaintance?"

"Certainly," said the stranger. "I pursued a certain clew into that big apartment-house we have just come out of, lost it hopelessly among its upper regions, and, in making my way back, chanced to overhear a few words that excited my interest."

"A certain clew, you say?"

"Yes."

"Let me ask you frankly what brought you to the Cavendish."

"A veiled woman in a gray suit."

"Ha! the mysterious feature developed by the inquest?"

"Yes."

"You think her the murderess of Miss Hanshaw?"

"Stranger, you can bet your life on that; and I shall hunt that woman down, or my name isn't Jeff Hardman!"

This was somewhat startling, for it would not do to have Miss Whitback annoyed by a professional sleuth-hound at all events. But something yet more startling was in reserve.

"You are a detective, sir?" said Willis, concealing his surprise by a re-examination of the card.

"Only professionally so at home; but I'm henceforth into this thing from private motives."

"Ah! perhaps you were personally acquainted with the—with Miss Hanshaw?"

"Never saw her alive."

"Then your interest in the affair—"

"Is centered altogether in her twin sister, my runaway wife, whom I believe to be the murderess."

Both Willis and Harold stared.

"Bless me!" exclaimed Willis; "I never knew of Miss Hanshaw having a sister at all."

"Neither did I," said Harold, "and Miss Hanshaw was, moreover, my friend."

"Well, you know it now, or you ought to."

"A little impatiently. "But it's a long time between drinks, and I reckon I'll say good-evening."

"Hold on!" cried Willis, with a change of manner, that was no more than natural; "we'll join you with pleasure, if you say so. And after that we'll be glad to have you dine with us." This last sentence was accompanied by a speaking glance at Harold, as much as to say, "Don't get on your dignity now. He may be worth the trouble, and we needn't necessarily take him to dine at the club."

This arrangement was agreeable to Mr. Jefferson Hardman.

"I'm stopping at the Rossmore," said he, half-an-hour later, when the trio were sitting around a handsomely provided side table at Delmonico's. "A fairish enough hotel in the way of fodder, though this chebang seems to take the belt."

The subject of Miss Hanshaw's murder, which had been put aside, was now resumed by Willis, who, the more thoroughly to gain the Texan's confidence, gave an outline as to the interest of Harold and himself in the affair.

"Stick to me, and I'll see you through," said Hardman, genially smiling over his claret. "I'm an old detective, you know, and I'm in this thing to win."

"So am I," said Willis, showing his badge. "Fact is, I've done a little detective work in an amateurish way, and am somewhat known to a limited circle as the Rocket Detective."

"Good enough! And your friend, Mr. Markoe, here?"

"He is in with me heart and hand, through sympathy. He was Miss Hanshaw's escort on the night preceding the murder."

"Of course, of course! Wasn't I present at the inquest?"

"Odd, though, that I didn't see you there! Still, the room was crowded."

"But I don't take up much room in a crowd, as you'll allow," said Hardman, in good-humored allusion to his diminutive person, which seemed full enough of energy, for that matter. "Gad,

though! that Venetian dagger business was almost a corker for you, sir." With a nod toward Harold.

"Yes," said the latter, mastering his dislike for the Texan, which he had somehow imbibed from the start, "it was a strange complication."

"You may say that, sir! One might even think that the person who stole your poniard did so for the express purpose of murdering the young lady with it, and then implicating you as the assassin."

Harold started.

"It does look like it," said he. "This is the first time the idea has occurred to me."

"I thought of it on the instant," said Willis, quietly.

"Now look here," said the Texan, "let's give this feature a sifting. Might you, Mr. Markoe, have had some rival envious enough to have concocted such a plot?"

Harold colored uncomfortably.

"Rival in what?" said he, sharply.

"Don't be huffy. Why, in Miss Hanshaw's good graces, to be sure—some chap whom you had supplanted, and might therefore be secretly thirsting for revenge on both the lady and yourself?"

Here Willis and Harold exchanged a strange glance, for there was a painful secret between these two friends. It was this: Willis Hawley had paid attentions to Miss Hanshaw first, and had, in a certain degree, been subsequently supplanted, or so he fancied, in her esteem by Harold Markoe, though a later acquaintance of the lady's. But at the same time there had never been any rivalry, simply because Harold had never known of his friend caring a straw one way or the other, while Willis had quietly withdrawn from Miss Hanshaw's circle, with no one being the wiser as to his true feelings in the case, and therefore the comradeship of the young men had not suffered in the least.

"You are laboring under a misapprehension, Mr. Hardman," said Willis, taking up the question for Harold's relief. "Mr. Markoe could have had no rival in Miss Hanshaw's affections, because he was simply her trusted acquaintance and sometime escort. Miss Hanshaw had many admirers, but no acknowledged lover, so far as is known."

"Oh, then I'm away off, and I beg pardon," said the Texan, heartily. "Still, Miss Hanshaw, judging by her corpse, was handsome enough to have excited both love and jealousy, perhaps without knowing it."

"That is true. You say her twin sister was your wife?"

"I say it, yes—to my sorrow."

"Will a discussion of this subject annoy you?"

"Not in the least. I shall merely expect confidence in return. Cut away, if my terms are agreeable."

After weighing the matter of an exchange of confidences well over in his mind, the Rocket Detective proceeded.

"Little was known of Miss Hanshaw's family," said he. "But both Markoe and I knew her quite well, and it does seem strange that she never mentioned having a sister, least of all, a twin sister."

"But wasn't she pretty reticent altogether regarding her family?"

"Yes."

"She was that," said Harold, too. "It was the one mystery in Arabella Hanshaw I could never account for."

"Perhaps I shall be able to account for it," said the Texan, while Willis ordered some cigars.

"Acknowledge then, to begin with, that about all you knew about the young lady's antecedents was the fact of her having inherited the wealth of her uncle, Gabriel Hanshaw, a rich and not altogether scrupulous old hunk in his time, and quite as much a pawnbroker and usurer as anything else."

The young men nodded.

"Here's the story for you, then. Ten years ago, Gabriel Hanshaw, a crabbed and penurious old bachelor, then living in Syracuse, this State, surprised his neighbors, among whom he was variously known as 'Shinplaster Hanshaw' and 'Stingy Gabe,' by adopting as his own the twin orphan daughters of Dorothea Burbeck, his only sister. The young girls, Arabella and Claudia Burbeck, were at that time between sixteen and seventeen, and as like as two peas in personal appearance, though vastly different temperamentally. They were also bright, handsome, and fairly educated, though destitute. The old uncle agreed to adopt them and constitute them his joint heirs, on the sole condition that they would assume his name. This the orphans gladly agreed to, and a new household was started under rather promising aspects, Stingy Gabe turning out, to the surprise of everybody, both indulgent and kindly in his new relations of guardianship to the young girls."

"An own father could scarcely have been kinder, in fact. But one thing he demanded in return—implicit obedience to his paternal authority. This was gratefully accorded by Arabella; it was refused by Claudia. Hence the former became the sole heiress of her uncle's house and heart, while the latter was cast off and disinherited."

"It happened in this way. Old Hanshaw had

large property interests in Texas, necessitating a personal visit there twice a year. It became his custom to treat the girls to the trip alternately, leaving the other behind to look after the home establishment. On the fourth of these semi-annual trips, Claudia, the younger twin, unfortunately chanced to be his traveling companion."

I say unfortunately, for it was then that she met her fate in me. 'We met by chance, the usual way,' at Fort Worth, during a temporary sojourn of the guardian elsewhere, and I made love from the start like a house afire. Claudia was barely eighteen, pretty as a picture, sentimental and amiable; while I was but twenty-eight, better looking than now, and rather better known as a horse and cattle broker than as a gambler, which, honestly speaking however, was my true and only vocation."

"I will also candidly admit that, much as I was fascinated by the girl's beauty and manners, I would never have proposed marriage if I hadn't deemed it cock-shure that she was to be the old codger's joint heir. I couldn't have afforded it, you see. Well, there was my mistake, and, though it wasn't exactly Claudia's fault, I couldn't help feeling a little hard toward her after I had put my foot into it."

"I proposed for her as soon as Mr. Hanshaw got back to Fort Worth. Unfortunately for me, the old fellow was too familiar with my real antecedents to admit of my bluffing. The horse and cattle brokerage dodge didn't go down with him for a cent's worth. He not only wouldn't hear of my suit, but swore that if Claudia ever saw or communicated with me she should be disowned and disinherited forthwith. He also drove me from his presence, stigmatizing me as a fortune-seeking gambler, ruffian and reprobate—in other words, laying it on so thick that, with any other man, I would have shot him on the spot. Not that he said much more than the truth, mind you, but mainly because I'm apt to be a little ugly when stirred up by a particularly sharp stick."

The little Texan looked fully equal to being ugly on occasion, as he paused for an unpleasant little short laugh, accompanied by an expressive twitching of the mustache and eyes that was not good to see, but the young men, his hearers, though more or less interested in his narrative, abstained from comment.

"Well, gentlemen, continued Mr. Hardman, "I was just soft enough to believe that the old gentleman would come around all serene after the marriage, and that same day I ran off with Claudia, and married her in Galveston. As I intimated before, there was where I was egregiously, tetotally sucked in. From that hour till his death, several years later, he never gave us the slightest recognition. Appeals for aid were alike wasted on him and on Arabella, who became his sole heiress not long after their removal to New York, where Mr. Hanshaw died four years ago, possessed of large real estate interests, chiefly in apartment-house blocks, in one of which, the Belgrade, Miss Arabella took up her residence soon after coming into possession. Not a stiver of the fortune has ever come to Claudia or me, though we were mostly starving poor. Our appeals for aid were never even answered by the woman who now lies so ruthlessly, mysteriously murdered."

"Have you had children by your marriage, sir?" asked Willis.

"One, a boy of nine, who is now with me at my hotel."

"And your wife?"

"She ran away from me three months ago. I have been pursuing her ever since. I arrived here in that pursuit about a week ago. I did not personally visit Miss Hanshaw, feeling morally sure that she could know nothing of my wife's whereabouts, because of the hatred and bitterness that had grown up between them, especially on Claudia's part, with whom it amounted almost to insanity."

"And you imagine the presumed murderess of Miss Hanshaw—the mysterious veiled woman in gray—to be your wife?"

A spasm of anguish shot over the little Texan's bronzed face.

"I am compelled to think so. She had brooded so constantly over her sister's inhumanity that it must have diseased as well as sharpened her faculties. Her resentfulness against Arabella was little short of madness. For years I had endeavored to argue her into a forgetfulness of her wrongs, real or fancied, but in vain."

"Was she provided with means for prosecuting such a journey, in the pure interest of revenge?"

"She stole away my savings—some four hundred dollars—before deserting me. I had to sell out my drinking saloon in Texarkana for the wherewithal to pursue her. But only at the inquest to-day did I suspect her of being her sister's assassin."

"Why, may I ask?"

"The description of the suspicious veiled woman in gray struck me as answering for Claudia on the instant. Among the wearing apparel she took away with her was just such a pearl gray suit. Then, for several years back, Claudia has had a way of going about with her

face veiled, even in the house and in sultry weather at times. It was one of her eccentricities—aberrations, they might be called. So was a trick of hers of picking nervously at her finger-ends, whether gloved or not, just as was described in the servant's testimony with regard to the veiled visitor."

Both Willis and Harold drew a long breath, and exchanged a significant glance, as much as to say, "He makes out a pretty strong case, anyway; and the best of it is that it lets poor Helen out of the complication, however strangely she may have become tangled up with it."

"If you will allow me to be perfectly frank with you, Mr. Hardman," said Willis, after a thoughtful pause, "there is only one thing I can't understand?"

"Speak right out in meeting," said the little Texan, off-handedly. "What is it you don't understand?"

"Your willingness to hunt down your wife," was the blunt rejoinder, "and bring such a terrible crime home to her, even if you honestly believe in her guilt."

"Oho!"

"Yes; that is what I can't understand."

The Texan's brow darkened, as with bitter and painful recollection.

"Oh you can't, eh?" he growled. "Well, if you knew that things haven't gone right in our domestic life, perhaps you would understand better?"

"Perhaps so."

Hardman seemed struggling hard with some emotion.

"Oh, blank, blank it all!" he snorted out, half-piteously; can't you guess nothing? In addition to robbing me, Claudia was a faithless wife. There, blank, blank it!"

Commiseration and sympathy at once took the place of distrust in the minds of both young men.

"I apologize!" said Willis, heartily. "Say no more on the subject."

"Neither of us would have knowingly wounded you," said Harold, with no less kindness. "You've said enough, sir, to convince of your honest belief." And he ordered some more wine.

"But it is necessary that I should say two or three things more," said Hardman, who had by this time recovered his good-natured composure. "As I said, I was convinced that I recognized Claudia's insane work in this tragedy as soon as I heard the woman Bridget's testimony as to the veiled visitor. Then, after the fire alarm, I rushed out of the Belgrade with the rest. I waited long enough to ascertain the result, and then, while strolling meditatively up the crowded street, what was my astonishment at seeing the very veiled woman in gray—Claudia herself—in an open barouche?"

CHAPTER VII.

A BIT OF FAMILY HISTORY.

"Yes, yes!" exclaimed both Willis and Harold, excitedly.

"The width of the thoroughfare, crowded with vehicles, separated us," went on the Texan. "While I was making my way across, the barouche dashed off down a side street, to be quickly followed by a hansom, into which two gentlemen had hastily sprung."

"Yes, yes; we were they."

"I am a good runner, having been something of a sprinter in my younger days. I took after both carriages on foot, but only got in at the death, too late—that is, just in time to see you chaps disappearing into the Cavendish, and to learn from your caddy that a veiled lady in gray had preceded you therein but a few seconds. Suspecting you at first as my false wife's confederates, I dashed in, but was apprised of my mistake by the elevator boy; I went on up, making inquiries at every flat from bottom to top—except, oddly enough, the one into which you must have disappeared—but without success. So certain was I, however, that Claudia was still somewhere secreted there, that I was still wandering around the ground-floor passage when you gentlemen stepped out of the elevator on your way to the street. The rest you know."

All this was very plausible, and the young men began to take additional "stock" in their chance guest.

"You still think the fugitive disappeared into the Cavendish, then?" said Willis.

"Yes; though it's a mystery how I missed her. But doubtless you, who were so much closer on her heels than I, you think so, too, don't you?"

"Yes, but we were no less bewildered than you," cautiously admitted the Rocket Detective, whose chief solicitude was now to shield Helen Whitback from identification with the veiled fugitive on the part of an outsider.

"Fresh mystery?" said Hardman. "Yet you were detained up-stairs there a good while?"

It was only fair that he in his turn should expect some particulars, but Willis merely mentioned the fact of his having relatives living on one of the floors, who had insisted upon the detention that had been made.

"But it is all mysterious enough," he went on to say. "Those shrill cries overhead that inter-

rupted the inquest—do you ascribe them to Claudia?"

"I do now, though I didn't know what to think at the time. Among her other accomplishments, my wife could make her voice unrecognizable at will."

"Still, the hall and empty apartments overhead were searched in vain, as you must remember."

"She may have easily evaded the search. Insane murderers are proverbially cunning."

"True; and insanity would likewise account for the imprudence of screaming out at all."

"I shall see Mr. Sharp to-morrow," said Hardman, as preparations were made to separate. "He looked like a keen one, and may suggest something."

"Oh, you will see Sharp, then?" said Willis.

"Undoubtedly. It is my duty. I may, like enough, take him into my confidence to a certain extent."

"Shall you? Mr. Markoe and I had decided to go it alone, without consulting the regular authorities."

"There you're smart. Blast the officials, where a real mystery's to be ferreted out! I've had my fill of their pigheadedness before this. But then Sharp isn't a regular authority, you know, and I shall size him up mighty close before giving anything away. Besides, business with regard to the estate will compel me to call on the lawyer."

"The estate?"

"Yes; the murdered woman's, Miss Hanshaw's, to be sure. Of course, if she left no will, Claudia, my wife, is the heir at law."

"To be sure—she, the murderess."

"Exactly; and, in event of Claudia's death by the rope or otherwise, our little boy, Cowby, naturally succeeds her, as a matter of course."

"Oh!"

The two friends then separated from the Texan, after making an appointment with him for the following day.

"Come," said Willis, in his business-like way, as soon as they were alone. "It is only nine o'clock. We must hunt up Lawyer Sharp, without delay. He is doubtless at his club, and I know where that is."

"What are we to see him for?" inquired Harold, though going along without demur. "We are not heirs at law."

"We must confirm this fellow's story with regard to this unlooked-for twin-sister, Claudia, before we can take any solid stock in him. Don't you see that?"

"Now I do. But is Mr. Sharp likely to be informed on the subject?"

"If any one is, I should say. At all events, he was old Hanshaw's lawyer before he became poor Arabella's."

They were hurrying down Broadway on foot.

Suddenly Harold made a bewildered gesture.

"Willis, what do you think of it all?" he exclaimed.

"The Lord only knows!" was his companion's response, with a gesture very similar to his own. "Heaven guide us to the end! So far, it is an unrelieved mystery—a stretch of midnight sea, without a beacon gleam."

"Still," and there was a suppressed anguish in Markoe's tone, "Helen must be saved at any cost."

Willis paused under an electric light before answering, and his companion noted with surprise that his face was set and white.

"Ay, at any cost!" he replied, with strange energy.

"Even if—"

Their eyes met. No need for Harold to finish aloud the dreadful question of his agonized heart—"Even if this Claudia is a myth, and Helen Whitback should prove to be Arabella Hanshaw's murderess?"—as their eyes met thus in a single startled gaze.

"Ay, even then!" Willis slowly responded, in a sepulchral voice. "Yes, I swear it! even though it should torture my heart to save the idol of yours."

A sort of half-revelation burst upon Harold. "Good God!" he faltered; "what do you mean?"

"Nothing—nothing now! Pass the night with me, and perhaps you will find out. Come, let us on, on, on!" And Willis led the pace again with a sort of self-contained frenzy, that lasted until the doors of Mr. Sharp's club-house were reached.

They were so fortunate as to find the lawyer there, and disengaged.

He gravely corroborated everything that had been said with regard to the twin sister Claudia's existence and history, while betraying no little surprise at the knowledge already obtained.

The young men merely mentioned Hardman as their informant, without particularizing the extraordinary circumstances of their meeting with him, and then ventured to seek for information concerning the Texan himself.

"I incline to the opinion," said the lawyer, "that Claudia's husband is a daring and consummate rascal; but then I know nothing of my own knowledge, and he may have been less wicked than unfortunate. I last heard of him as one of Jim Courtright's detective des-

peradoes in the strikers' riots down there along the Southwestern System a year or more ago. But you say he will call on me to-morrow, after which I may be better able to judge him."

Harold and Willis passed the night together at the latter's lodgings.

It was not until they were ensconced in adjoining beds that Harold ventured to remind his friend of the half-promise made under the electric light.

"What were my words then that prompted your wonder?" said Willis, slowly.

"They were these—touching upon the preservation of Helen Whitback's safety at any cost: 'I swear it! even though it should torture my heart to save the idol of yours.'"

"Ah! you have never guessed the explanation, then?"

"Never."

"Well, isn't Helen Whitback the real idol of your heart?"

"Assuredly."

"Arabella Hanshaw was the idol of mine."

Harold was silent for a moment, as if half-stunned.

"My God! Willis, you really mean it?" he said at last.

"Yes."

"You—you loved her?"

"To madness."

"Oh!" exclaimed Harold; "had I but known—had I but guessed!"

How heartless and mean seemed his flirtation with the poor dead young lady now! An immense sense of contrition overpowered him afresh; and when he again spoke it was in a broken, deeply self-reproachful voice.

"Oh, Willis! can you forgive me?"

"Peste, man! I have done that long ago. You were blameless, because you knew no better. The blame was with poor Arabella, who would never tell me yes or no—or with me, in not acceding to her woman's privilege of capriciousness until making sure, one way or another, instead of drawing off in a huff, as I did."

"I am sure she must have loved you in her secret heart. I see it now for the first time."

"And now it is too late! Good-night, Harold! Go to sleep."

On going to the Rossmore on the following day at noon, the hour of their appointment with the Texan, it was only to find word left with the clerk that he had been unexpectedly called away, and would hardly be back before five in the evening.

"Mr. Hardman seemed pained at having to break his appointment," said the clerk, "and he begged me to make his excuses. Yonder, however," with a smile, "is his son and representative, should you desire a conference."

The young men regarded with uncommon interest the individual indicated—the oddest little boy they had ever seen, who was gravely chewing tobacco and scanning a newspaper in a vast upholstered chair, that seemed to fairly engulf him, directly across the broad open space from the official desk.

The little boy's oddity chiefly consisted in his combined *sang froid* and solemnity of expression, which were little short of supernatural, and in fact of his being dressed just like a man, and a Texas man at that, which was so characteristic that even a diminutive revolver-butt peeping in view from somewhere in the neighborhood of his hip-pocket or waistband would not have seemed glaringly incongruous.

"So that is Mr. Hardman's son?" said Willis.

"Yes," said the clerk, with another smile, "that is Master Cowby Hardman, of Texas."

Hearing his name pronounced, the little man expostulated, laid down his newspaper (the wiping of a pair of eyeglasses would have been a finishing touch to the maturity of it all,) slid out of his chair, and sauntered up to the group with the nonchalance of a veteran courtier.

"Am I right, gentlemen," said he, gravely, "in addressing you as my sire's new acquaintances, Messrs. Hawley and Markoe?"

"Perfectly right, sir," said Willis, keeping his countenance with some difficulty.

"Ah, then I'm to inform you that my father is off to Central Park, in the vicinity of the Obelisk, in obedience to a pressing call—I may even say *pursuit*—which you gentlemen are supposed to understand."

"Let us follow," suggested Markoe, in a low voice. "My dog-cart is close at hand, you know, and Peters, my valet, is probably looking for me at the stables."

Willis assented, and, after sagely thanking the microscopic Southwesterner for his information, they were soon bowling along through the Park.

Their search was unrewarded until late in the afternoon, when, after lunching at the Casino, and while driving slowly for perhaps a dozenth time in the vicinity of the Obelisk, they were suddenly startled by an unexpected apparition.

It was the veiled woman in gray—or at least one of them, supposing there to be more than one—slowly threading the narrow walk just below the monument, in the direction of an ornate tunnel under a roadway.

"Don't lose sight of her this time," whispered Willis, in a sort of a gasp.

He was on the ground almost before the cart could be brought to a stop; Harold, flinging the

reins to his man, was after him like a shot, and the game was once more afoot.

But the veiled figure had not been taken unaware, and was now darting away down the wooded path like a startled fawn.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE VAILED WOMAN AGAIN.

SAVE by the fugitive and her pursuers, the path, a rather secluded one, was wholly deserted, which fortunately prevented the unusual spectacle from attracting undue attention.

But the chase was not a long one.

Presently the young men, after following the path under the roadway, came to a panting pause, the fugitive having suddenly effected a disappearance.

"She must be in there," said Harold, indicating a small but dense clump of trees and shrubbery, in the gorgeous fullness of their autumnal foliage. "It is the only such clump in sight."

"Yes," said Willis. "You guard its opposite side, while I enter it at this. We can scarcely miss her."

No, they could not; and even before the search began, the veiled woman in gray, doubtlessly realizing that continued concealment would be impossible, stepped trembling out of the copse, and stood before them.

For an instant the young men were too much astonished to be even exultant, but it was only for an instant.

"Madam," said Willis, with respectful firmness, "we shall have to trouble you for a glimpse of your features."

The figure made a beseeching gesture of dissent.

"For whom do you take me?" said she, in a low, shaking voice, in which there was, nevertheless, an attempt at disguise.

Harold was about to respond with impulsive abruptness, when Willis motioned him to silence, which, however, he was not disposed to obey.

"I will speak!" he muttered, in an impatient aside. "It is only due to Helen Whitback that the real veiled criminal should be exposed forthwith."

Another unheeded gesture on the part of the veiled figure.

"Madam," he went on, "we take you for the veiled woman who visited and waited in Miss Arabella Hanshaw's apartments to within half an hour of the discovery of her murdered body, and who is strongly suspected to have perpetrated the dreadful deed."

"Oh, no, no, no!" wailed the woman, though still in the artificial voice. "Do let me go on my way. It could not have been me! Indeed, indeed, it—could—not—have—been—me!"

Willis here interposed with a stern gesture.

"We sincerely hope not, madam, for the credit of both humanity and womanhood," said he, coldly. "But perhaps all doubts can be permanently set at rest by the removal of your veil. Come, we insist!"

After another despairing movement, the woman, with a sullen, dogged air, obeyed.

Both young men receded a step or two, in mingled astonishment, confusion and chagrin.

The countenance thus unexpectedly brought to light was Helen Whitback.

She was very pale, but with a little red spot on either cheek, and her lips were compressed, her eyes defiant.

"You would have it!" said she, in her natural voice. "I trust you are satisfied."

Harold clasped his hands in an agony of pained bewilderment.

"Helen, what does it mean?" he exclaimed. "I beseech you to explain."

She eyed him with a hard, dry look, but made no answer.

"Let me beseech you then," said Willis, earnestly. "If deaf to your lover's appeal, your cousin's may prevail."

Her lip curled.

"I shall not explain," said she, in low but firm tones.

"Why not, Helen?"

She clasped her hands, lowering her eyes, her bosom heaving painfully.

"Oh, do not ask me!" she murmured. "I cannot—I dare not!"

There was nothing but heartfelt sympathy for her now, and yet the mystification was almost exasperating.

"You cannot—you dare not!" repeated Willis. "But, Helen, you must—it is a case of imperative necessity."

"I do not see it," still with lowered eyes and averted face.

"Why, you are in danger, else—in imminent, appalling danger."

"I in danger?"

"Undoubtedly!"

"Of what?"

Willis hesitated, they were awful words to connect her gentle personality with, but he said them.

"In danger," said he, slowly, "of being publicly arrested and imprisoned—perhaps even put to trial and convicted—as the assassin of Miss Arabella Hanshaw!"

"Impossible! Ah, my God! do not say that, Willis."

"I must say it—your reticence compels me to!" he went on vehemently. "Your description—that is, the description that you outwardly answer to in every particular—a veiled woman in gray, of exactly your costume, height and carriage—is known by this time in every police-station and detective agency in New York, and its bearer eagerly 'wanted,' as they say! It is not only Harold and I, as amateurs, but every professional detective in town—not to mention a human sleuth-hound from Texas, somewhat on his own hook—that are on your track. You may be snapped up and jailed at any moment."

Surely, such words, if any, might have inspired the young lady with alarm; but, strange to say, they seemed to have an opposite effect, or, at least to renew her persistence and fortitude in the mysterious role she was pursuing.

"It is very hard," said she, in a still low, but perfectly collected voice. "But I shall take my chances."

"Helen, are you crazy?"

Her only reply—and it was sufficient—was to lift her eyes to the scrutiny of both young men.

Still-troubled eyes they were, to be sure, but clear, sane, unflinching, even to their luminous depths.

The young men were almost at their wits' end.

"How changed you are, Helen, from even yesterday!" exclaimed Harold.

Their engagement was still "on," though it was long since they had been very lovingly, and for the first time in her life she openly rebuked him.

"Are you, Harold Markoe," she said, with studied coldness, "the one to complain of a changed demeanor? Ah, it is well!"

Harold could only flush painfully and devour his own heart. The heedless neglect, of which the murdered woman might once have been the incentive, was truly recoiling upon him with a vengeance.

"Still, Helen," said Willis, eagerly, "you tacitly acknowledged the change that is charged."

"I do not deny it, Cousin Willis."

"Why is it so?"

"Something has happened since yesterday."

"Something! but what?"

"I cannot tell you. Pray do not prolong this scene."

He bowed a little sarcastically, making a motion as if wishing to wash his hands of her.

"You are free," said he. "Don't let us detain you, Helen."

"But she must not neglect to let us know if any one else detains her," said Markoe, humbly mustering up courage for the addendum.

She rewarded him with a look that was almost grateful, but at once became thoughtful.

"You alluded to a man from Texas?" she half-queried, still addressing herself to her cousin.

He nodded.

"Who is he?" a little anxiously.

"You know how to ask questions, Helen, if you have forgotten how to answer them!" he retorted, a little surlily.

"Nay, but answer me!"

"It is a fellow who pretends to be also on the track of Miss Hanshaw's veiled murderess."

"Pretends!"

"Well, is then, I fancy; for I have no reason to discredit his professions."

"His name?" still more anxiously.

"Jefferson Hardman."

Her face became suddenly convulsed with pitiable terror.

"Oh," she entreated, "have nothing to do with that man! Do not, Willis; nor do you, Harold! He is a terrible man—a monster! I swear it!"

They could only look at her with fresh bewilderment.

Then Willis laughed a little bitterly.

"It is very hard," said he, mimicking her voice and manner, no less than her words, of a few minutes previous. "But we shall take our chances."

She merely bowed her head, bit her lip, and, once more lowering her veil, turned to go.

Harold advanced a step.

"I shall not submit to being followed, sir!" said Miss Whitback, haughtily. "Pray, don't forget that."

The young man reddened, but submissively retired.

Willis, however, stepped forward in his turn.

"One word before you go, perhaps to rush from us into danger!" he implored. "The answer to but one question—to but half a question, if you choose—for part relief at least, Helen, of the doubt and suspense and ignorance you persist in leaving us in!"

She partly turned.

"What is it?"

"Of your own knowledge, is your present appearance the counterpart of another?—Is there more than one veiled woman in gray?"

"No—yes; that is—but how should I know? I refuse to be questioned."

She disappeared down the path, and then there was the sound of a coach starting off from near at hand.

"Thank Heaven for even that precaution!" muttered Harold. "She will not positively court attention by passing through the streets on foot."

"Yes, so far is well."

"What do you gather from her contradictory response?"

"My boy," said Willis, softly, "methinks there may be two, if not more, veiled Ricmonds in the field."

"I think so, too," said Harold.

They sorrowfully retraced their steps, and were about climbing upon Harold's dog-cart, when whom should they see but the former object of their search, Mr. Jefferson Hardman with a fine team of hired bays, which he managed to perfection?

"There he is!" said Harold, hurriedly. "Shall we tell him of this last adventure?"

"Not a word," was the warning response.

At this moment the Texan saw them, and drew up expectantly, his face beaming with apparent gratification.

Harold signed to his man in the cart, and then the friends hurried along to where Hardman had halted.

"We have been leisurely looking for you, Mr. Hardman," said Willis, after the usual greetings. "Where have you been?"

"On a wild-goose chase," was the reply, with something like a suppressed oath. "Of course you got word of me at the hotel?"

"Yes."

"Well, it was tough, at first glance, my breaking my appointment in that summary fashion. But look here!"

He handed them a note, which read as follows:

"Meet me near Obelisk in C. P., any time after noon to-day. If you are secret, shall explain all. Will be in a Victoria with a cross-match gray and dark team. CLAUDIA."

Willis read the note last, when it seemed to fall from his hands, and he could not find it again.

"The wind may have whisked it away," said he. "How provoking!"

"Never mind it," said Hardman. "A mere scrap of paper!"

"But did you recognize it as Claudia's handwriting?"

"At first glance. She wrote in two or three hands, and that was in the most familiar one. Curse her!"

"She failed to keep her appointment, then?"

"Of course, or why am I here? Caramba! she would be at my side, or handed over to the police long before this. I hired the best turnout I could find, but have done nothing all the afternoon but fool around this blanked Egyptian monument like a clown in a circus, without finding hair or hide of her."

"Look!"

The drive, at whose edge they were conversing, was thronged with equipages.

It was Harold Markoe who had last spoken, and he was staring at one particular equipage which was driving rapidly past.

The equipage was a stylish Victoria, driven by a powerfully-built coachman, not in livery, and drawn by a cross-matched black and gray span.

The Victoria contained a single occupant, nearly the whole of whose statuesque figure was made visible by the low-cut nature of the vehicle, and whose face was turned, rather scrutinizingly it seemed, toward the conversing trio.

It was the veiled woman in gray.

The Texan turned livid beneath his bronze, but his jaws were set and his eyes sparkling with fierce resolve.

"I'll see this through or die in my tracks!" was ground out, with a profane accompaniment, from between his clinched teeth.

The next instant he was whirling away in mad pursuit of the Victoria with as much directness as the thronged condition of the driveway would admit.

For Willis and Harold to regain the dog-cart and follow his example was the work of but another moment.

"Did you mark the expression of the man's face?" queried Harold, while this was being done.

"Yes; it was as though an accusing ghost had suddenly risen up in the person of that veiled woman before him. I can't understand it. Still—"

But the chase was again destined to prove a failure.

They presently overtook Hardman, whom a mounted policeman was threatening to arrest for dangerously fast driving, and by this time the Victoria had hopelessly disappeared.

CHAPTER IX.

A TANGLED WEB.

Two days slipped away, during which our two friends saw a great deal of Mr. Jefferson Hardman, of Texarkana, but without anything of fresh interest occurring, though, without knowing it they were now on the heels of fresh discoveries, new semi-revelations and yet more tantalizing complications.

Harold was waiting for Willis over his solitary

club-house lunch, when he was rejoined by the latter, who seemed in higher spirits than usual.

"You have seen Sharp?" queried Harold, as the other seated himself, *sans ceremonie*, for a biscuit and a glass of wine, while rubbing his aristocratic hands softly over one another.

"Don't I look as if I had?"

"Yes; but why has the lawyer so strangely kept himself out of our way till now?"

"That is his business, and Sharp is a deep one. But we're all to be on hand at the funeral and the reading of the will this afternoon, and there may be something of fresh interest."

As Willis spoke, he was slowly flattening out beside his plate a couple of notes and an envelope, which he produced one after another.

"In what way?" asked Harold.

"Well, Miss Hanshaw's funeral and will-reading are in themselves out of the common run."

"I should say so, from what we have heard."

"Yes; according to Lawyer Sharp, by a provision in the will, its contents are only to be made public on the fifth day after the testatrix's death, and in the presence of her embalmed remains. An odd sort of will for a handsome and pleasure-loving young woman like Arabella to have made, eh?"

"Yes; but she was both strong-minded and eccentric, no less than pleasure-loving. What have you there? Ah! you then obtained the precious letter from Mr. Sharp?"

"To be sure, and here they all are side by side: Miss Hanshaw's letter of appointment with the veiled woman in gray, as produced by Bridget McWaters at the inquest; the envelope, addressed to Helen Whitback, which doubtless originally inclosed the same; and finally the 'Claudia' letter to our incomprehensible friend, Mr. Hardman, of Texarkana."

"Which the wind did not whisk away, after all," supplemented Harold, with a smile.

"But mightn't it have whisked it away up my coat-sleeve? However, here it is with the rest."

"How do the two notes compare?"

"Look for yourself. It is as I surmised. The comparison is perfect; they might have been written by one and the same person."

"Yes, if Miss Hanshaw had not been dead at the time the Claudia note was penned," said Harold, who was now examining the writings.

"Still the resemblance is almost perfect."

"Almost! Why, man, it is perfect. There are absolutely no points of difference. The handwritings are one and the same."

"Impossible! You simply rave!"

"Why, gentle youth?"

"Simply because Miss Hanshaw, being dead, could not have written them both."

"Granted; but Claudia could."

"What! the first one, too?"

"Yes; and on this theory. Hardman may misconceive with regard to Arabella's animosity while being correct as to Claudia's secret and bloodthirsty revengefulness against her rich twin sister. Arabella might even have consented to harbor her in secret, against some fancied or pretended pursuit. You recall a certain feature, now generally forgotten, of Bridget's testimony at the inquest?"

"I know what you mean. About Arabella's mysterious secrecy with regard to the interior of her bedroom for five days preceding her death?"

"Exactly; just as if she might be keeping some one jealously concealed there."

"I thought of that at the time, but afterward dismissed the idea. Well, then, on the supposition that Claudia was the person thus befriended, or concealed?"

"On that supposition, I suppose again that the ungrateful Claudia, having made up her mind to murder her sister, and having, through her sister, made the acquaintance of Helen Whitback—"

"Oh, hold on! I can't follow. You bewilder a fellow."

"But can't you suppose a thing?"

"Yes; anything, for that matter."

"Well, now, let me go on, will you? Helen was acquainted with Arabella, for she owns up to that much."

Harold groaned.

"If she would only own up to a little better purpose," he half soliloquized, "there would be plain sailing enough."

"But as she won't she won't, and there's an end on't. Don't interrupt, please. Well, supposing Claudia to have formed Helen's acquaintance, and also to have decided upon the hour for the murder—the hour of Arabella's return from that entertainment with you—in fact, just as it did happen somehow."

"Well?"

"Well, what more cunning than, than for Claudia to have written, in her doomed sister's name, with an imitation of her handwriting, too, making this appointment with Helen, for the purpose of diverting suspicion from herself, should it come to the worst?"

"But of course Helen would not pay any attention to such an outlandish appointment."

"And of course Claudia would guess as much. So, what would she do, after giving Helen time to get the note, but slip out (being veiled woman in gray Number One, so to speak), visit Helen

(veiled woman in gray Number Two, you know, say through emulative imitation of the costume, which she has seen and admired), secretly repossess herself of her own letter, though compelled to resign the envelope, then slip back to the Belgrade after Arabella's departure with you, cause herself to be admitted by Bridget (to whom she was theretofore a perfect stranger), on the strength of the forged letter of appointment, which she purposely leaves for the latter to pick up, perhaps with the express purpose of having it traced back to its envelope, and thus bring the intended crime home to the innocent Helen Whitback. There you are!" a little triumphantly. "Arabella comes home, and undresses in her parlor, thinking her sister—the foul adder whom she is so generously harboring—sound asleep in the adjoining room, which for five days they have been sharing in common. But Claudia (veiled woman in gray Number One), is merely lurking, say behind the door, poniard in hand. She springs out, stabs her sister to death, cuts off a long tress of hair as a fiendish trophy, glides out of the house, just as witness Mrs. Golightly testified, jumps into the mysterious coach in waiting, and is gone."

He threw himself back in his chair, put his thumbs in the armholes of his waistcoat, and beamed.

"Excellent, even for a Rocket Detective!" commented Harold, trying to hide a smile.

"But what's wrong about it?"

"Did I hint of anything wrong?"

"No; but you don't hint of anything good, either."

"Well, your theory is simply an elaborated botch."

"You're very polite; but instance, man, instance, as Touchstone says."

"Well, why the severed tress, for one. If a murderess, is Claudia necessarily a scalp-seeker?"

"Still, she, too, is from Texas—from the Wild West, you know."

"Then again, how could she have locked the street door, leaving the key inside, after going out of it? You remember old Mr. Farwell's testimony as to everything being found secured by him, after the discovery of the murder?"

"Y-e-s. But the veiled woman did come out somehow before that and drive away. Mrs. Golightly saw her."

"Granted that much, then; though I wouldn't always like to take Jeannette Golightly's word, even under oath. And I might even strengthen your vaunted theory in this regard."

"How?"

"According to the same witness, the coach the presumed murderess drove away in had a powerfully built driver, out of livery, and a cross-match team composed of a black and gray. The Victoria in which we last gave chase to the veiled woman was similarly provided."

"By Jove! so it was."

"Do you consider your elaborate theory strengthened?"

"Rather. It lets Helen out of the line of direct suspicion, any way."

"But she has never been in that, but only in the middle. No, no; I'll grant you two veiled women in gray, or half-a-dozen, if you choose, but your theory must be hopelessly dethroned, though leaving confusion worse confounded."

"I bethought me this morning," said Harold, consulting the contents of a pocketbook, "of a brief note received by me a fortnight ago from Miss Hanshaw, in which she politely declined to accompany me on an excursion I had proposed. Here it is." He handed a mauve-tinted letter to Willis. "That is unquestionably in Miss Hanshaw's own chirography. Compare it with those others."

Willis hastened to do so, and then looked up with a baffled and bewildered stare.

"Well?" said Harold.

"There is no imitation, no counterfeiting; all are in one and the same handwriting!"

"The handwriting of Arabella Hanshaw?"

"Yes."

"And what does that prove?"

"That Arabella assumed two or three different characters—veiled women in gray—successfully identified herself with Helen Whitback, Claudia Hardman and her own personality, and then brutally accomplished her own murder, besides running away with a lock of her own hair and doing some *post-mortem* letter-writing and masquerading, as a proof of her superhuman ingenuity. By Jupiter! you can make nothing else out of it."

"It looks like it, just at present, any way," said Harold laughing. "Come, let us attend the funeral will-reading without delay, and abstain from theory-building in the future, at least until one or two things shall be brought about."

"What are those?"

"The breaking of Helen Whitback's reticence, or the unmasking of Veiled Woman in Gray Number Two, as we shall designate the one who led us all such a chase in the Victoria."

"Good enough! But tarry yet a moment. We haven't accounted yet for our Texan's strange ghostliness on that occasion."

"What! attempt to account for *anything* in connection with the Belgrade Mystery? What are you thinking of?"

"But, joking apart, the man's conduct was singular that day, not to say suspicious."

"It was so. He set his teeth as if about facing a phantom."

Might he possibly be the murderer, and Claudia's presence hereabouts nothing more than a pretense and a blind?"

Harold burst into a yet more derisive laugh, in which he was partly joined by Willis, but still with a slightly protesting air, as if only half-giving in to the apparently supreme ridiculousness of his own suggestion.

"I know it sounds startling and absurd," continued the latter. "But then—"

"But then," interposed Harold, still laughing, "it would only presuppose the existence of yet another veiled woman in gray—say Number Three, in the person of our odd little friend, the Texan—and wouldn't that be just a trifle too monotonous, even for the Belgrade Mystery? Come along, old fellow!"

CHAPTER X.

MISS HANSHAW'S WILL.

THOUGH the Belgrade Mystery, as it was generally called, continued to occupy public attention almost to the total exclusion of any other local tragedy, Mr. Leonidas Sharp, in assuming control of his murdered client's affairs, had proceeded with such skill and discretion that the fashionable apartment-house itself, besides being restored from the slight ravages made by the fire, had been in a great measure already divested of the sense of horror and morbid curiosity that naturally clothed it, as a direct consequence of the assassination.

The startled tenants of the house and its neighborhood had settled down again into the routine of every-day life from which they had been so rudely startled.

The newspapers still teemed with allusions, more or less satirical, to the now proverbial veiled murderess in gray, whose clewless coming and going was still an exasperating stain upon the escutcheon of the police, but folks had about got over the insane expectancy of seeing her flit noiselessly before their eyes at almost any moment, if indeed they had not ceased to care for her at all.

Indeed, there were not a few who had come to the conclusion that there had never been any veiled woman at all, save in the diseased imaginations of the Widow Golightly and Bridget McWaters, and that the real murderer, if ever brought to light, would turn out to be some cheap, unromantic criminal, with burglary as his incitement to the deed.

A couple of stalwart policemen, stationed at either side of the Belgrade, were sufficient to keep idlers from an undue tarrying in the vicinity; and, indeed, on the occasion of the funeral and the will-reading, after the handful of interested parties had gathered in the murdered woman's parlor in obedience to Mr. Sharp's carefully discriminating invitations, there was almost nothing to indicate the terrible event of less than a week before.

The door was open between the parlor and the adjoining sumptuous bed-chamber, where was lying in a fine coffin the now embalmed remains of the slain woman, surrounded by funeral trappings and a few appropriate floral emblems.

The latter were the contributions of Mr. Sharp, Harold Markoe and Willis Hawley, while the brother-in-law of the deceased, Mr. Jefferson Hardman, who had made himself rather conspicuous about the place during the last few days, had only that morning sent in a magnificent flower piece, wholly composed of magnolias and other gorgeous semi-tropical blooms, which, by reason of its great size, had been posted in one corner of the parlor itself.

There were present, besides some newspaper reporters and two or three obtrusive public officials, the following persons: Mr. Sharp, Mr. Jacob Farwell, Mr. Jefferson Hardman and his son, Mr. Harold Markoe, Mr. Willis Hawley, Mr. Civil Justice Penniman, and Bridget McWaters. This was all, except an Episcopalian minister, who had been engaged for the funeral services, the undertaker and the latter's two assistants.

But just before the will was opened, the unexpected entrance of two other persons, one after the other, excited no little surprise among one or two of those more nearly concerned in the proceedings.

The first of these was Mrs. Golightly, who sailed into the room with a great display of fuss and feathers, notwithstanding a decided but unsuccessful attempt to appear mournful, and who, after putting her handkerchief to her eyes as if overcome at the mere sight of the casket, would have crowded into a narrow seat immediately next to Harold Markoe, but that a stern, contemptuous glance from him caused her to content herself elsewhere.

The next was Helen Whitback. Simply, but unobtrusively dressed in black, she made her way rather timidly into the room, bowed to Mr. Sharp, who had known her from childhood, and then, after silently bending over the face of the dead, slipped into a remote corner without

even looking toward Harold or Willis, the only others present with whom she was acquainted.

Mr. Sharp occupied a seat at the elegant writing-table of the deceased.

He presently arose, with the will in his hands, but, before opening it, indulged in a few prefatory remarks.

The will, he said, had been duly drawn up by him under the directions of the deceased, and then signed and attested in his presence, only a few months previous to her distressing and untimely death, as would appear in the date. The testatrix had been a woman in the prime of life, health and robust mental and physical vigor, and the document would be offered for probate immediately after the reading.

He then opened and read the will, whose contents were the occasion of much surprise and perhaps no little disappointment.

The will first provided for its being read, if practicable, only in the presence of the testatrix's embalmed remains, and before any funeral services should be said over the same, and within one week after death, when, after the reading thereof, the remains were to be privately, and with no public display whatever, to be placed in the family reception vault connected with the testatrix's burial plot in the cemetery of Greenwood.

Then came directions as to the embalming of the body and the amount to be used in the funeral expenses.

These were followed by provisions for the realization into money value of all the property, real and personal, supposed by the testatrix to amount to a million, within a period of one year, or at the discretion of the executor—Mr. Leonidas Sharp—to whom was accorded sole and absolute discretionary powers.

Then followed the provisions whereby, after bequeathing five thousand dollars in trust to Bridget McWaters, the entire estate, divided into three equal parts, was left to the testatrix's "very good but somewhat impatient friend, Mr. Willis Hawley," to her "sweet and highly appreciated friend, Miss Helen Whitback," and to her "dear and much suffering twin sister, Mrs. Claudia Hardman, of Fort Worth, Texas, when last heard from," or, in case of death, to their immediate heirs forever.

The astonishment of both Helen and Willis can be better imagined than described.

The latter now learned for the first time how dear he had been in the estimation of the only woman he had ever loved, but whose just resentment of his supersensitive jealousy and coldness he had misconstrued into heartless coquetry, even to the extent of driving her into flirtations with another man, which had doubtless been pursued as a mask for her own pique and sufferings.

"Too late, too late!" was now the cry of his anguished self-reproach; and bitterly understood by each was the glance that he exchanged with Harold Markoe.

As for Helen Whitback, though she made no other demonstration than to raise an astounded, half-bewildered look to the lawyer's face, almost immediately to lower her eyes again with a slight flush, she was simply amazed.

She was present at Mr. Sharp's written request, though against a silent protest on her own part, and without dreaming of being personally interested in the will, wherein the mention of her name was, moreover, a revelation to both her cousin and her lover, as to her intimate acquaintance with the testatrix, the knowledge of which could not but increase her embarrassment.

But it was Hardman upon whom the unexpected provisions of the will produced the most unenviable effect.

His swarthy face turned almost green with chagrin and disappointment, and he was on his feet in an instant, his black eyes snapping resentfully.

"Who are these persons foisted into that will as co-heirs with me?" he exclaimed. "It ain't even supposed, I reckon, that they had any family ties with the young woman whose estate is thus disposed of?"

"There are no co-heirs mentioned with you, sir," said the lawyer, coldly. "You must be beside yourself."

"How? Oh, you mean that it's my son, instead of me! Well, it's all the same thing, since I'm his natural guardian. Cowby, my son, stand up, and show yourself."

The junior Hardman, looking more preternaturally small of size, adult of garb and precocious of demeanor, gravely stood up, took a fresh chew of tobacco, and eyed the lawyer with a solemnity of self-importance that would have discounted General Tom Thumb or Commodore Nutt in the palmiest light of their manikin days.

"Here I am, governor!" piped up the little fellow. "What's the racket, anyway? Ought the hull swag to belong to you and me, and are they tryin' to chisel us out of a part of it?"

Mr. Jefferson Hardman, Senior, did not reply, save by laying a proud and caressing hand upon his son's shoulder, which, however, was sufficiently eloquent in itself.

"Look upon the precocity of the great South-

west, and die of envy!" was the language of that paternal gesture. "Turn from the juvenile exponents of your effete Eastern State civilizations to the entranced contemplation of this condensed jewel of manlike juvenility from the untrammelled realm of the Lone Star!"

There was a general smile, Mrs. Golightly even laughing outright, but Mr. Sharp kept his countenance.

"Neither is Master Cowby Hardman mentioned in the will," said he, quietly. "The third beneficiary is Mrs. Claudia Hardman." He turned to the clergyman, with a bow.

The funeral services were then proceeded with in such a matter-of-fact way that no further interruption could be attempted on the part of the remarkable father and son, much as they might have wished it otherwise.

All those present, with the exception of the clergyman, accompanied the remains to the cemetery vault.

As numerous coaches were provided, Helen Whitback and Bridget McWaters had one to themselves, much to the secret satisfaction of at least the former, who had not spoken a word and still preserved her modest reticence.

Mrs. Golightly, somewhat less willingly, though without demur, occupied another coach, along with old Mr. Farwell and Judge Penniman.

The Hardmans, in the post of honor directly following the hearse, were consorted with Mr. Sharp; while Harold and Willis had a vehicle to themselves.

"I candidly admit," said Willis, "that I like running down a criminal better than attending a funeral. But I would gladly undergo to-day's doleful ordeal if Helen were our fellow-passenger."

"I agree with you," said Harold. "In view of this new revelation, we might get something out of her at last."

"Leave it to me. I will try to institute a new arrangement on the way back. What a puzzle it all is!"

"Incomprehensible from first to last!"

"To think of poor Arabella secretly responding to my attachment all the time, even when she was pretending to flirt with you!"

"Her manner of alluding to you in her odd will proves that."

"And what a brutal idiot I showed myself to be! Too late, too late! But I never did understand women. Perhaps if I'd had a sister, it would have been different, but then—oh, God! I am to have some of Bella's wealth, it seems, but what is that to the glorious prize of her living love and goodness that I so madly refused to snatch when in my very grasp? Ah! had I but known, had I but known!"

Willis's emotion was so genuine that his considerate companion hastened to turn the subject.

"But you couldn't have known, and are therefore doubtless no more to blame than I, with my equal misunderstanding of her heart and temper," said he, gently. "But wasn't the legacy to Helen an equal stunner to you?"

"Yes, yes, of course; perhaps even more so; Why, brief as must have been the acquaintance between the young women, it must have acquired the strength and depth of a great friendship!"

"Undoubtedly. Oh, if Helen would but tell all that she locks up in her breast, how simplified things might be!"

"Well, we'll make one more attempt with her. Bridget rather likes me, and I will maneuver to have her exchange places with me on the way back."

"Then what of me?"

"You must endeavor to crowd in, too. What a coarse, mercenary brute that fellow Hardman is!"

"An unmitigated dog in the manger, and the youngster is an unmitigated chip of the same block. Some family mystery there, depend on it. But we shall know more to-morrow."

"What do you mean?"

"There is to be a meeting in Sharp's office to-morrow. He softly hinted it to me. You will be notified."

Then Willis knitted his brows.

"I feel impatient for to-morrow," said he. "Hardman may be drawn out by Sharp into saying more than he would intend. But of course, for the present at least, we must keep on the better side of the fellow."

"That goes without saying; though I rather fancy you are black-listed by Hardman already."

"How?"

"Aren't you one of the joint-heirs?"

"Ah, to be sure! I had forgotten. The fellow looked mad enough to eat poor Helen and me both."

Bridget McWaters proved as complacent as could be expected, and when preparations were being made to quit the cemetery Helen suddenly found herself in the same coach with Harold and her cousin.

Both young men, however, looked so demure and so innocent of any collusion in the matter that she merely bent her head, as if to the inevitable, and with just the ghost of a little smile about the corners of her pretty mouth.

Indeed, all would have been well enough but for the irrepressible Mrs. Golightly, who also crowded into the same equipage at the last moment, and the four were driven away in company.

"How do you do, Mr. Markoe?" exclaimed the widow, cheerfully. "I have been just dying to chat with you ever since the funeral service, and this is my first opportunity. How have you been?"

Harold was so immeasurably disgusted as almost to forget the politeness naturally due to a pretty woman.

"Oh, I don't know how I've been!" he growled, disconsolately, with an uneasy look at Miss Whitback, whose interior amusement seemed to increase. "Ask me something easier."

The widow laughed inanely, and then hinted pretty broadly her lack of acquaintance with Miss Whitback.

Here Willis, who was an old-time acquaintance of the widow's, came to the rescue, and the coveted introduction was brought about, though Helen merely acknowledged it by a subdued bow, without saying a word.

"I must begin by congratulating you on your good fortune, Miss Whitback," said the widow, effusively. "I should judge that the legacy was no less welcome than unexpected."

"I would rather not talk about it, if you please," said Helen, in a very low voice.

But the widow would decidedly rather talk of nothing else, and she continued doing so, to the threadbare exhaustion of the subject and the weariness of her companions, more than one of whom would, if allowable, have groaned aloud more than once in sheer desperation of spirit.

As if this were not enough, she then began to speak of the departed with a mixture of fulsome eulogy and masked criticism in a way that made the unfortunate Harold's whilom attentions to both Miss Hanshaw and herself most painfully prominent, till, between shame and confusion at having all this so discussed in Helen's presence, and oblivious of the fact that the latter was evidently more amused than offended, he felt a delirious inclination to bid the garrulous widow hold her tongue on pain of being throttled on the spot.

They were still not out of the cemetery when Mrs. Golightly seized yet another embarrassing topic in her vulture grip, and began rending it after the fashion that was all her own.

"What more about the mysterious veiled murderess?" she almost shrieked. "Ain't it odd there ain't been a sign of her since that early morning when she vanished into that coach before my very eyes? Are the police still at fault, do you think, in spite of the newspapers? I'll bet my life I'd track her down, if I was only a man and a detective! I'm a very fearless woman, I'd have you know. Now, if I could only get one more glimpse of that veiled woman in gray—"

"Look!"

The grim interruption was from Willis Hawley, who, with a sardonic smile, was pointing out at a solitary figure near the summit of a wild little wooded knoll, not a great distance from one of the minor cemeteries.

Mrs. Golightly just looked, screamed, and fell back in convulsions, more or less real—literally scared into fits.

The solitary figure on the knoll was the veiled woman in gray!

In an instant, not only the coach in which they were riding, but also every other one in the cortege, was brought to a stop, with the occupants (except the terrified widow) gathered by the roadway, while Willis and Harold were bounding toward the figure, thus conspicuously thronged, as it were, in full view of all.

But the mysterious figure only remained thus for an instant, gazing down at them with seemingly proud and contemptuous indifference.

Then, with a slow gesture of one arm and hand, from which something was seen to flutter down, like a snowflake or a bleached autumn leaf, it stepped back, seeming to melt into the copse behind, and was gone as mysteriously as it had appeared.

The young men were not long in returning from their bootless chase, baffled and dispirited.

"It's no use trying to run down a will-o'-the-wisp," grumbled Harold.

"None at all," echoed Willis. "The woman just sunk or dissolved into nothing, and yet I could have sworn to her human solidity the instant before."

Here they caught Lawyer Sharp's eye, which covertly directed their attention to Hardman.

The rest were sufficiently pale and agitated, but the Texan's terror, or rather horror, made him unpleasantly conspicuous.

His swarthy face was still livid, notwithstanding the evanishment of the startling apparition, and there was a shocked, hunted, wolfish look in his eyes, for all that his hand was gripped into his bosom, as though in search of some deadly weapon of defense.

"Thunder an' lightnin'!" chirped the miniature Hardman, junior, evidently bewildered at the startling change in his progenitor's aspect; "what's up with you, pop?"

The man seemed to master himself by an immense effort.

"Nothing, you little rascal!" he growled in response. "I am all right—only—"

He broke off abruptly, and re-entered the nearest coach, followed by Cowby and the lawyer, the latter with an inscrutable look in his face.

At a sign from Helen Whitback—who alone of all the rest had manifested no emotion whatever—Bridget got into the coach with the still overpowered Mrs. Golightly; and when the line was again started Helen, Harold and Willis were once more together, though rid of their whilom obtrusive companion.

"How nicely you effected that, Helen!" commented Harold, with a sigh of relief. "If that woman had forced herself to my side again, I think I should have been tempted to her assassination."

Helen only smiled, and then settled down in her corner with such a quiet but evident determination to maintain her studied reticence at every hazard that both young men hopelessly resigned themselves to the seeming inevitableness of the situation.

Only once again that day did they see Mrs. Golightly, and then it was with malicious look on her recomposed face, as much as to say: "Don't imagine you have escaped me altogether, young sirs. I have pumped Bridget for all she knows, if I have failed with your impenetrable Miss Helen and yourselves."

CHAPTER XI.

LAWYER SHARP'S CONSULTATION ROOM.

"MY dear sir, you are evidently laboring under a most absurd apprehension."

These words were Mr. Lawyer Sharp's, and they were calmly addressed to Mr. Jefferson Hardman in the former's private office on the day following the funeral, Hardman, junior, Miss Whitback, Harold Markoe and Willis Hawley being also present by appointment.

The little Texan, now in full repossession of his nerve and self-assurance, though rather uncomfortably excited, simply scratched his head and glared.

"You're as polite as a basket of chips, even for a legal luminary," was his sneering response. "What absurd misapprehension am I laboring under?"

"I have already intimated it," said the lawyer, suavely. "You seem to imagine yourself one of the legatees named in Arabella Hanshaw's will, whereas you are not."

"Ain't my son, however?"

Here Master Cowby Hardman puffed out his little breast, flicked a speck from the lapel of his swallow-tailed dress-coat, made an addition to the cud of tobacco that already bulged out his left little cheek to a preposterous size, and looked preternaturally important.

"By no means," was the calm response.

"What?"

"Didn't you hear my answer, sir?"

"Yes; but it don't count. Look here; ain't my wife, Claudia Hardman, one of the joint legatees?"

"Undoubtedly."

"Supposing her to be dead—"

"Is she dead?"

There was an abruptness in the interruption that seemed to startle the Texan greatly.

"How should I know whether she is dead or not?" he growled.

"Excuse me," said the lawyer, pointedly, "but you ought to know at least better than any one else."

Hardman could be seen to control some powerful agitation.

"See here, Mr. Sharp," said he, "what in thunder do you mean to insinuate?"

"Nothing. I never insinuate. It is not logical to insinuate."

"Oh! Is there any harm then in supposing a case—for instance, the case of my wife Claudia Hardman's death?"

"No harm, nor good either. We'll suppose the case, then, to oblige you."

"Thanks. Well, in that case, wouldn't my son here be heir in her place?"

"Not necessarily."

"What?"

"Claudia Hardman's son or child would naturally inherit her portion."

"Well, ain't this boy her son as well as mine—our son, in fact?"

"How do I know? I have your word for it; that is all."

Livid with rage, Hardman bounded from his seat, revolver in hand, his lesser edition of himself imitating his bellicose example with a fidelity of mien and action that was indescribably comical.

"Death of my life!" he raved; "is this a slur on the legitimacy of my precious offspring?"

"You are a fool!" said Mr. Sharp, laughing unrestrainedly. "If you do not behave yourself, I shall have to hand you over to the police."

"You will, eh?" And the revolver was rather reluctantly put out of sight, Master Cowby again following suit with the regularity of clockwork.

"Undoubtedly, because you are obviously laboring under a fresh misapprehension."

"In what way?"

"You apparently imagine that you are still in

Texarkana, or say in Breathitt county, Kentucky, whereas you are here in New York, where legal consultations are somewhat differently conducted."

"Oh!" and Hardman, somewhat disconcerted, resumed his seat, muttering half to himself: "Well, the touch-and-go custom out in my section seems to me the honestest of the two."

"Oh!" echoed Cowby, with his parrot-like chirp, as he likewise climbed back into his chair, after utilizing a monstrous stoneware cuspidore as a footstool, "we're up to snuff, Mr. Pen-and-parchment, an' don't you forget it."

The little fellow then discarded his cud for a cigar of enormous proportions, which he nonchalantly puffed, after striking a match on the sole of his toy boot.

"I say, Hardman," said Willis Hawley, smiling meditatively, "you're all out in this thing. Of course, supposing your wife's death, the legitimacy of her heir would have to be proved as a legal formality. Mr. Sharp could have intended no reflection."

"His apology is accepted," said the Texan, off-handedly.

"The acceptance of what has not been offered is something decidedly unique," said Mr. Sharp, a little testily. "When the death of the joint legatee, Mrs. Claudia Hardman, is proved—I do not say that it may not be, and that more promptly than may be anticipated"—this with a peculiar look at Hardman—"it will be time enough to talk of her heir-at-law, and not before."

Hardman looked nettled.

"I'm in an embarrassing position," he admitted.

"I should say you were," said Sharp, who had already been intrusted with the Texan's theory. "You profess to believe your wife identified with the veiled murderess of Miss Hanshaw (which would not invalidate her joint heirship in the latter's estate), and you intend to have her apprehended, convicted and hanged as such, in order that your dear little boy there may inherit her third."

This was painfully blunt, and the Texan flushed; but he did not avoid the issue, notwithstanding that the lady present, Miss Whitback, was looking at him with a cold and unqualified horror that might well have discountenanced a bolder man.

"Supposing that such a consummation could be brought about," said he, after a pause, "am I right in presuming that my dear little boy, as you are good enough to designate my son, Master Cowby Hardman, would so inherit, sir?"

"Of course, of course; provided he is proved to be her boy—Claudia's boy no less than yours."

"Sir," with an exasperated glare, "as this is the second time you have seen fit to insinuate—"

"I never insinuate, as I told you before," interposed the lawyer, contemptuously. "Tush! how did the boy get such a Christian name, anyway?"

Hardman would have answered with true Texan fervor, but that his son and scion imperatively, though with filial respectfulness, waved him to silence.

"By baptism, sir!" then yelled the little fellow, springing into an improvised hornpipe of ecstatic rage, while working his diminutive jaws furiously over the end of his big cigar. "By my halidome, would you dare asperse my very name, sir?"

The lawyer's dryness of manner gave way before the test. He leaned back in his chair, and fairly laughed till the tears were on his spectacles, and his mirth was in some measure contagious.

But the elder Hardman pathetically patted his irate little son and heir on his shiny little head, and approvingly set him back in his chair.

"That will do, Cowby," said he, in an approving *sotto voce*. "Don't forget what is due to your family, no less than to yourself."

"There is nothing more, I believe," said Mr. Sharp, cheerfully. "As executor of Miss Hanshaw's estate, under the will, I shall make no attempt at a settlement until the mystery surrounding the lady's death is in some measure cleared up. Anything more, Mr. Hardman?"

"Not at present, sir," was Hardman's rather stiff reply, as both he and Cowby dignifiedly arose. "Only," looking straight at Miss Whitback, "it may be that, by identifying the veiled woman in gray with a certain other young person, I may see reason to alter my opinion very materially with regard to the criminality of my unfortunate wife, Claudia Hardman."

"Very good," said the lawyer, easily; "though Miss Whitback, for instance, might safely masquerade in a similar costume to her heart's content, if such should be her pleasure. The veiled apparition in the cemetery yesterday proves that most conclusively."

"That goes without saying," said Harold, and both he and Willis cordially shook hands with Helen, who then hurriedly took her departure, after giving her hand to the lawyer.

Hardman again looked disconcerted, and just then one of Mr. Sharp's clerks entered with a whispered message.

"Pray go out this way, gentlemen," said the

lawyer, indicating a little side-door communicating directly with the outer passage. "A lady client, who might not wish being seen, is waiting for admittance in the outer office."

Hardman pricked up his ears, and was the last to take the hint, but the lawyer's persuasive grasp was on his arm, and he passed out with the rest.

But before the door could be locked behind him, he got a parting glimpse back into the private office, and of the lady client as she was entering.

"Hold on!" he exclaimed, springing after Harold and Willis, and grasping them roughly. "Can you guess who the lady client is we have just so unceremoniously made room for?"

She looked at him with astonished inquiry.

"The Veiled Woman in Gray, by all that's holy!" gasped the Texan.

CHAPTER XII.

FATHER AND SON.

HARDMAN'S mingled horror and desperation as he made this announcement recalled his singular aspect while beholding the portentous figure in the cemetery.

"What!—the veiled woman—now, in the very office we have just quitted?" exclaimed Harold. "Man alive, it is impossible!"

"I'll take my Bible oath on it, gentlemen!" persisted the Texan, who had by this time regained his assurance. "Come on! it's now or never, if we're ever to sift this infernal mystery." And his jaws came together, with a gritting sound.

"You're right," said Willis, in his swift, business-like way. "You fellows remain right here, while I run around and re-enter the room through the public office."

The others nodded, and he darted down the stairs, for this was a private passage, and he would have to make a detour on the next floor below before reaching the main staircase, by which alone the outer office was accessible.

Harold, Hardman and Hardman junior silently waited on guard at the private office side-door.

But they waited much longer than they had anticipated.

"What do you expect to find revealed," whispered Harold at last, "in case we shall have fairly cornered the mysterious woman?"

Hardman turned to him a face haggard with conflicting emotions, but his hands were resolutely clinched.

"I shall unmask her, sir," he responded, slowly and with a strained, quivering voice. "Yes, sir, I shall tear aside the veil, if the features of Claudia Hardman herself—of the dead returned to life—shall be discovered by the unmasking!"

Harold thought these very strange words, and they were destined to recur to him with much greater significance upon reflection.

But at this instant the private door opened, and Mr. Sharp appeared, in the act of once more blandly dismissing Willis Hawley, whose hand he was cordially pressing.

"Good-by, my dear sir; and good-by once more to all of you, gentlemen," said the lawyer, with unusual affability. "It grieves me that my lady visitor should have caused you such an astonishing misapprehension. If she had remained more than an instant, you would have seen your error. Good-day, good-day!"

That was all, though Harold had noticed, before the final closing of the door, that the lawyer's urbanity was assumed—that, in fact, he had not once failed to keep a secret glance on Hardman's haggard face with the scrutiny of an eagle.

Willis smiled a little sheepishly when he found himself once more alone with his companions.

"I missed her," was the substance of all he could say in satisfaction of their eagerly inquiring looks. "I went up the main stairs while she was descending in the elevator, after only exchanging six words in the private office. Mr. Sharp assures me of it, and he ought to know."

"Sharp be hanged!" exclaimed Hardman, harshly. "She must still be in there—she couldn't have had time to escape!"

"That for Sharp!" reverberated Hardman, junior, snapping his little thumb and finger contemptuously, while alternating back from cigar to cud. "Pop, you've got me to stand by you, remember that."

With a playful gesture, as if brushing away an insectivorous buzz, Willis replied to the senior Texan.

"The lady was certainly gone when I entered the office," said he, "and there was no place therein where she could have been concealed."

"But wasn't I right about her identity?"

"You were right about her being a lady in gray, wearing a veil."

"Ah!"

"Mark, however, that I said *a*, and not *the*, lady in gray."

"What of that?"

"A mere coincidence, probably. At all events, Mr. Sharp is sure that she was altogether a different person from the woman you expect to unmask."

"What does he know about *what* woman I expect to bring to book in this thing?"

Both young men looked at him in surprise, while even Master Cowby, elevating his eyebrows, drawing down his tobacco-stained mouth corners, and tilting back his little shiny plug-hat, said softly:

"Slow now, Governor, go slow! Where are we anyhow?"

"Why, you have made no secret of your expectations with either Sharp or us!" said Willis, gravely. "We have taken it for granted that you expected to identify your wife, Claudia Hardman, with the personality of the veiled woman in gray, and no one else."

"It isn't my fault if you have," said the Texan, seeming to be getting himself well in hand for a new departure. "That was days ago. A fellow's mind may change with circumstances, you will admit?"

"Certainly. Are we then to understand that you possibly expect to identify some other person than Claudia with the veiled murderess of Arabella Hanshaw?"

"You are at liberty to so understand it, if you choose. There's no law against it, to my knowledge."

"What has come over you, Hardman?" interposed Harold, impatiently. "Why can't you be open and candid with us, as we have been with you?"

The Texan smiled.

"You haven't been so with me of late, neither of you," said he, quietly. "No, not for the last two days at least."

There was so much truth in this—at least, in the moral or interior sense—that both young men had some difficulty in not betraying a consciousness of it.

"I think you are over-suspicious, Hardman," said Willis, in a conciliating way. "Suppose you instance wherein you imagine that Markoe and I have sought to conceal anything from you."

"I don't imagine, I know," was the collected response. "Prior to the will-reading, for instance, you never even hinted to me the existence of the young lady, Miss Helen Whitback."

"She is my cousin and Markoe's betrothed," Willis hastened to elucidate.

"It is well to tell me now, when I already know as much."

"A purely family affair."

"Ah!"

"Besides, what possible connection can Miss Whitback have with our detective affair?"

"Perhaps every connection."

"What do you mean, Hardman?"

His answer was like a blow in the face for both.

"Simply this: That she, Miss Helen Whitback may be the same other person than Claudia that I expect to identify with the veiled murderess of Arabella Hanshaw."

A few days previous, the announcement of this suspicion concerning Helen would have occasioned unqualified consternation in both her cousin and lover; and even as it was Harold was possessed of a strong inclination to throw the Texan over the stair-rail; but, as a matter of course, after the vindication of Helen's innocence by the cemetery incident of the preceding day, the innuendo advanced seemed little short of preposterous.

"You are either crazy or bewitched to think of such a thing!" said Willis, the first to rally from his surprise.

"Am I? Then you and your friend were equally idiotic until a day or two past."

"What do you mean?"

"That until then you both secretly admitted at least the possibility of such a thing, especially after—"

"After what?"

"Well, after twice tracking the veiled woman in gray home to her."

Willis and Harold exchanged glances, and then it was still the former who continued the subject.

"We grant the truth of what you say concerning our thoughts at that time," said he.

"But wherein were we faithless in not sharing them with you? Reflect upon our relations with the young lady."

"All right. Let that pass, then."

"Ah! does not yesterday's incident in the cemetery, then, let Miss Whitback triumphantly out of the complication?"

"No; it simply proves that there are more than one veiled woman in gray."

"Well?"

"The one in the cemetery may be the counterfeit, and Miss Whitback the genuine—I mean, the real murderess. Ditto with regard to the dual appearance in Central Park. You see I am better informed than you thought."

"We do see that. Continue."

"Well, by the contents of the murdered woman's will—of which Miss Whitback might have had a prior knowledge—a motive is furnished for the crime on the young lady's part."

There was no denying this, and the friends remained silent, though Markoe especially was boiling with suppressed indignation.

"It all points to Miss Whitback," the Texan continued, "quite as strongly, to say the least, as to Claudia, who could have known nothing of the will, and whose instigating motive would

consequently have been purely revenge, or an insane freak, and nothing else."

"And we have only your word for that!" interposed Harold, roughly.

The Texan's brow darkened.

"What do you mean, sir?" said he.

"Just what I say. What do we, or any others for that matter, know about this Claudia beyond what you choose to tell us?"

"Ain't that enough?"

"No. You may have deceived us from the beginning, for aught we know to the contrary. Who and where is Claudia. She may even have died before her sister." [The Texan, noted by Willis, started and turned pale.] "Her present existence may be a myth."

"Hold on!" said Willis, temporizingly. "Hardly a myth, my boy, unless Veiled Woman in Gray Number Two is also mythical; and we have had ocular proof that she is not. Now, you, Hardman, lean to the belief that the woman you caught a glimpse of right in that private office might have been Miss Whitback herself?"

"Just so," said Hardman.

"But Miss Whitback, dressed in black, had only parted company with us in the same place scarcely two minutes previously."

"It does seem strange, but still she might have effected the transformation somehow and somewhere."

"But how and where? I am wholly unable to understand."

"So am I, but still it might have been done," said the other, doggedly.

Here Master Cowby stretched his little arms, balanced himself back and forth on his tiny boot-heels, and looked blase.

"How long are you fellows going to keep this thing up?" said he, with a yawn. "By Jupiter, I have got enough of it!"

"Ha!" said Willis, sarcastically; "Mr. Hardman junior has had enough of our conversation. Let us then cut it short."

He accordingly led the way to the street, with an instinctive feeling that the Texan detective would thenceforth proceed on his own hook, regardless of arguments to the contrary.

It was during the mid-afternoon rush of lower Broadway, in the vicinity of St. Paul's Church.

They had hardly set foot on the pavement before a little street girl, whose figure seemed not wholly unfamiliar, darted out of the crowd, slipped a note into Willis's hand, and was gone in a flash.

"Detain the child!" said Harold, springing forward; "'tis the same that brought us the warning directly after the inquest."

But it was too late.

"Why didn't you speak sooner?" drawled Master Cowby, with an impatient flourish of his little cane. "I'd have had her 'dead,' sir, if at the risk of my life, sir!"

Willis was reading the note, which he silently submitted to general inspection.

It was a pencil scrawl, evidently in a disguised but hasty hand, to the following effect:

"WILLIS HAWLEY:—Once again you are warned (especially the double-faced Texan villain in your company) to give up, until self-revealed in her own good time, your blundering search for
"THE VEILED LADY."

Upon the Texan particularly was the effect of this warning remarkable.

He was livid beneath his bronze, though his teeth were set, as with a desperate resolve.

"Look!" he gasped, pointing.

They saw the object of their search gliding along the opposite churchyard inclosure, at the end of which she was seen to wave her hand disdainfully before disappearing around the corner.

"Hold on!" said Hardman, as Willis and Harold made an instinctive movement in pursuit; "you can do nothing. Hasn't experience taught you that much by this time?"

They gazed at him curiously.

"One would almost fancy you afraid," said Harold, sneeringly.

"Afraid of what?"

"You should know better than I. But, how are we ever to solve the mystery without pursuit?"

"I shall take care of that, on my own part."

And, taking his son and heir by the shoulder, the Texan, now composed again, walked swiftly away.

"Let him go," said Willis. "We have not done with that man yet, have no fear of that."

CHAPTER XIII.

HELEN IN THE TOILS.

BUT a week passed without anything more being seen or heard of Mr. Jefferson Hardman, of Texarkana.

He had gone away from the Rossmore, with his extraordinary son and his rather slender baggage, leaving no word of his destination.

"He will turn up when actually 'wanted,' depend upon it," was Mr. Leonidas Sharp's rather oracular expression, when appealed to by Willis and Harold for advice.

"When 'wanted!'" echoed they, for the lawyer had by this time been fully taken into their confidence. "What do you mean by that, sir?"

"You must wait and see," was the smiling

response. "But, depend upon it, Mr. Hardman will not be lost sight of. Good-morning, my dear and astute young friends; and, if I were you, I wouldn't annoy Miss Whitback with any further questions on this distressing subject."

"But, Mr. Sharp," Willis had expostulated, "here is a whole week gone by without a fresh clew of the veiled woman in gray, and Helen still seems to be the key to the mystery."

"What of that? Do you forget the old lines—"

"When a woman will she will,
You may depend on't;
But when she won't she won't,
And there's an end on't?"

"Still—"

"And, moreover, where's the use of being a detective, if one is at a loss for the keys to mysteries? Ha, ha, ha! Good-morning, both; and pray don't forget to bring an old fellow word, in case of anything particularly fresh or appetizing."

"One might almost say," grumbled Willis, when again alone with Harold, "that the old lawyer was disposed to poke fun at us."

"It does look that way," said Harold, despondently.

They were once more in front of Mr. Sharp's office building.

Before Willis could continue his grumblings, a fashionably-dressed lady was seen signaling to them from an open coach at a near street corner.

"It's Mrs. Golightly," said Harold, in surprise; and, little liked as she was by either of them, they made haste to join her.

There was something covertly malicious in the wreathing smiles with which the pretty widow greeted their approach.

"Why do neither of you ever come to see me?" she asked, in her airily impudent way. "Am I to be punished with neglect because your veiled woman in gray remains an unseizable will o'-the-wisp?"

What could she know about their success or non-success in the matter? And, moreover, neither of the young men had been on visiting terms with the lady for many months.

Willis made the excuses that seemed called for, while Harold smilingly masked as well as he could the impatience and discontent with which the little woman had inspired him since the day of her spiteful testimony at the inquest.

"Haven't you any news for me?" continued the widow. "What of the interesting Texan, Mr. Hardman, and that dear, odd little boy of his?"

Willis shook his head disconsolately.

"Hardman has flitted," said he. "He might be a veiled woman in gray, too, for that matter."

"You don't say so!"

"And the dear, odd little boy of his has attended the flitting," interposed Markoe. "That is the worst loss of all. We don't know how to support it."

Mrs. Golightly laughed.

She had come to hate Harold quite as much as she had ever loved him, which is not saying a great deal, as her shallow nature, though capable of treasuring a spite, was utterly devoid of intensity of any sort.

"I know where both truants are," said she, complacently. "What do you think of that?"

They stared.

"For pity's sake, relieve our anxiety, then!" exclaimed Willis. "Don't you see how forsaken we are?" And there was much earnestness in his superficially bantering tone.

The pretty widow only shook her head, and laughed again.

"You don't deserve it, neither of you—at least, not for the present," said she. "However," and she grew suddenly grave, "are you really so desirous to resume the broken thread of your fugitive mystery?"

Their eager looks were a sufficiently eloquent response.

"Ah, I should say you are. Well, be on the watch in the neighborhood of the Belgrade soon after dark this evening, and you may get upon something to interest you; though bear in mind that I promise nothing for certain."

And then, with a wave of her fat little gloved hand, she drove rapidly away.

"I believe she wants to sell us," said Willis.

"So do I," said Harold. "The woman is capable of any heartlessness."

"Still, shall we go?"

"Oh, I suppose so."

And they accordingly did.

It was about nine o'clock of that evening, and the young men were patiently on the watch near the Belgrade entrance, with their eyes chiefly on Mrs. Golightly's parlor windows, directly opposite, in which a dim light was visible.

The night had turned raw and disagreeable, with threats of an approaching storm, and the street was almost wholly deserted.

Presently a close carriage was driven slowly along, and then halted in the shadow of a tall building adjoining Mrs. Golightly's house, where it remained as though in expectant waiting.

A moment later, a graceful figure flitted by the spot where the young men were partly con-

cealed, and, turning at the corner crossing, made directly for the widow's door.

In doing this the figure passed immediately under a street lamp.

Willis and Harold violently nudged each other at the same instant.

The little widow's half-promise of a sensation had not been in vain.

It was the veiled woman in gray!

Before they could recover from their astonishment, she had crossed the street, rung Mrs. Golightly's bell, and secured admission with the assurance of an anxiously-expected guest.

Even then the young men were forestalled in their pursuit by two men, one of whom they recognized as Hardman, who leaped out of the close carriage and glided into the house on the heels of the fugitive as noiselessly as phantoms.

"What can it all mean?" said Harold, hesitating on the curbstone.

"Come on!" excitedly whispered Willis, leading the way, "It is for us to find out."

They bounded up the widow's steps, and, without waiting to ring the bell, pushed open the door, which had been left unfastened.

Confused voices proceeded from the parlor, which, upon being entered unceremoniously, presented an unlooked-for scene.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE WIDOW'S MALEVOLENCE.

THE veiled woman, who was none other than Helen Whitback, stood with her face uncovered, calm and self possessed, and yet with a half-contemptuous, half-reproachful gaze directed at Mrs. Golightly, who confronted her with an air of malicious exultation.

Hardman, haggard but triumphant, was just saying: "So we have run you to earth at last! Mr. Officer, gently, if you please, but do your duty."

His companion, the person addressed—Heintzelman, a well-known police detective—stood close to Miss Whitback, with the touch of one hand lightly laid on her arm, a pair of glittering handcuffs in the other.

The intrusion of Harold and Willis upon this dramatic scene was at first altogether unheeded.

"Yes, yes!" snapped out the widow, malevolently. "Reproach me if you wish, Miss Whitback. It was just my intention to entrap your high-and-mightiness, and I am not in the least ashamed of my success!"

A contemptuous gesture was her statuesque victim's only answer.

Then another gesture repelled the officer, who had made a slight movement with the manacles, which he obediently slipped out of sight, after being addressed in a few words that were inaudible to all the rest.

"What are you about?" Hardman hastily demanded of the officer.

"That is my business, not yours," was the cool rejoinder; and Heintzelman smilingly helped himself to a chair, after offering one to his prospective prisoner, by whom it was declined with a graceful nod.

"But you'll be responsible if she escapes!" interposed the widow. "Beware, sir! The veiled murderess of Miss Hanshaw may not so easily be entrapped a second time, if she escapes you now."

The officer smiled.

As for Helen, she gave utterance to such a quietly derisive and disdainful little laugh in Mrs. Golightly's face that the latter fairly flamed with rage.

A torrent of furious and taunting words seemed, indeed, about to burst from the widow's lips, when Harold Markoe, advancing a step, interposed.

"Apart from your charge against Miss Whitback, madam," said he, "which is too absurd to be worthy of a thought, permit me to ask why you are disposed to glory in having entrapped her, as you call it?"

The widow was wholly carried away by her evil temper.

"To shame and disgrace her, as she deserves!" she cried, furiously. "To bring her bloodthirsty murderousness home to her, in your presence and the presence of your friend there!"

"That is quite evident; but why?"

The widow saw her error, and tried hard to master her rage, though half-choking with it.

"I—I am not here to be cross-examined," she blurted out. "Expend your shrewdness on that murderess yonder—upon your precious betrothed! Ha! ha!"

"You evade my question," said Markoe, coolly. "You do not answer it, because you dare not."

The widow turned pale.

"Shall I answer it for you?" he went on, pitilessly.

She bent her head, biting her lip till the blood started.

"What's all this?" interposed the Texan, with a privileged look toward the widow. "Speak up, Jeannette. There ain't been anything between you and this young chap, I hope?"

"You know," continued Harold, still addressing the shame-faced woman, as though no interposition had been made, "you know me too much of a gentleman to carry out my implied threat, madam, much as you may deserve the

reprisal. Know me as more magnanimous than yourself; I am silent."

But Willis Hawley, in view of the treacherous slight that had been put upon his cousin, was little disposed to a similar magnanimity.

"The widow doesn't deserve it, my boy," said he, with a biting sarcastic drawl that he could use on occasion. "It is simply proverbial how persistently, though vainly, she threw herself at your head even before poor Arabella's day."

"What in thunder is all this I hear?" cried the Texan, wheeling upon her in a white rage. "Woman! deny this man's assertions, or—"

But the climax of Mrs. Golightly's fury here found utterance in a hysterical little screech and she went off into a semi-swoon.

Silent, but forgiving and sympathetic, Miss Whitback was at her side in an instant, after casting a withering look at her cousin.

"It wasn't worthy of you!" was all she said, in a low voice; and she forthwith busied herself with effecting a restoration.

"Oh, don't trouble yourself, my dear!" said Willis, languidly. "You can't possibly heap coals of fire on that lady's head, with tenfold your forgiving disposition, and she wouldn't be worth it if you could."

His words were verified by the widow at this instant springing up, scornfully thrusting back the proffered assistance, and calling out at the top of her lungs:

"Don't touch me—not you—on your life, don't lay your hands on me! Murderous hands! Ugh! Arabella Hanshaw's blood-dabbled ghost would haunt me for a month. Mr. Officer, why don't you do your duty?"

The officer advanced a step in an apologetic way.

Miss Whitback drew on her gloves, and smiled.

"I am quite ready, sir," said she, with dignified collectedness. "I told you so at the outset, if you will remember."

Harris and Willis prepared to accompany her.

"I tell you, No!" said she, turning upon them imperiously.

"We shall fetch Sharp—we shall fetch our friends!" cried Harold, hurriedly. "You must not be locked up."

"In spite of the charge, bail shall be furnished at once," said Willis. "You will at least let us go for Justice Penniman."

"I tell you both again, distinctly, No!"

And she even expedited her departure in the officer's custody.

As Hardman was sullenly following, Harold tapped him on the shoulder.

"Your new address, if you please?" said the latter, significantly.

"You'll learn it soon enough," was the surly response. "Oh, have no doubt; you'll find me yours on occasion!"

Harold and Willis then hurried away, as a first step, to inform Helen's mother of the sad happening.

But yet another surprise was awaiting them.

"Thank you for your consideration," said the good lady, without a particle of excitement, when informed that Helen was arrested. "My daughter has a way of taking care of herself in whatever circumstances she may find herself."

CHAPTER XV.

A CLEW TO THE DAGGER-THIEF.

THEY next hurried to Lawyer Sharp at his club, but were no less mystified by his way of receiving what they considered their startling piece of intelligence.

The old lawyer, who was no less a "man about town" than an acknowledged fixed star in his profession, was prosaically washing his hands after sundry games of billiards, when it was brought to him.

"Well," said he, dryly, "Miss Whitback seems to have taken her arrest very coolly, from what you young gentlemen tell me."

"Yes."

"And she peremptorily insisted on you fellows leaving her to her fate?"

"Yes."

"Why the deuce don't you do it, then? Are the days of chivalry over? Is a fair young maid's express wish no longer of weight, even with her admirers?"

Harold looked savage, and Willis chewed his mustache.

"You're worse than Mrs. Whitback herself!" exclaimed the latter.

"Is the good lady you mention particularly bad off, then?"

"Not at all."

"How am I worse than she, then?"

"By the way you take the news of Helen's arrest."

"Ah! so her frail and still comely mother takes it coolly, then?"

"Or mysteriously."

"Mysteriously?"

"One might say heartlessly, if not acquainted with her idolization of her daughter."

"And therein is the mysteriousness of it, eh?"

"Yes."

"Then why not say she takes it composedly, and be done with it?"

Willis made an impatient gesture.

"You may think it a joking matter, Mr. Sharp," interposed Harold, severely. "But it is far different with us."

The lawyer, who had finished drying his hands, now slipped into his coat, and began wiping his spectacles.

"I never joke, young sir," said he. "I simply take things easy."

"I should say so."

"It is my dissipated habit to take a glass of Madeira before going to bed. Will you young gentlemen join me?"

Willis hastened to accept for both, lest Harold should be tempted to undue impatience of reply.

"Now tell me the particulars," said the lawyer, when they were seated at their wine.

Willis obeyed with the elaboration of detail derived from his whilom reportorial experience.

The old lawyer softly rubbed his hands together while listening.

"It is working, it is working!" he repeated, half to himself. "So the fair Golightly and our Texarkana friend were hand-in-glove in the little piece of *finesse*, eh?"

"In the piece of infernal treachery, yes!" exclaimed Markhoe.

"Correction accepted," said Sharp, urbanely. "But *finesse*, or all French politeness for that matter, is nothing more than civilized treachery. In sturdier Saxon, then, the goodly pair was as thick as two thieves?"

"That was about the size of it," asserted Willis.

"And the poor limed bird, the entrapped dove—of course she fluttered agonizingly when in the cruel toils?"

"She did nothing of the sort."

"What, not flutter?"

"No, sir."

"Not an agonize?"

"No, sir."

"Accepted the whole thing quietly, as if even prepared for it?"

"Yes."

"Well, now you do surprise me!" and the quizzical old fellow was preternaturally solemn, barring a suspicious twinkle behind his glasses.

Harold finished his wine, and arose with a generally disgusted air, Willis reluctantly following his example.

"Take a little legal advice before you go," said the lawyer half-jeeringly. "It isn't often given gratis, you know."

"We shall still be grateful for your learned advice, Mr. Sharp," said Willis, bowing gravely.

"Good! In the first place, don't worry about Helen Whitback's situation, as I am looking after her."

"Thanks."

"Next, no matter how pitiable and distressing her situation may seem to become, don't meddle without encouragement from her."

"We shall make our best effort at indifference."

"Next, devote yourselves entirely to the Texan's movements here in New York. His antecedents are my business."

"His present personality will suffice for us," said Harold, with a hard sort of smile.

"Next, bring me, when found, the tress of hair severed from the murdered woman's head by the author of the deed."

They looked at him eagerly.

"Is it possible for us to do this?" asked Willis, breathlessly.

"You, a Rocket Detective, to ask me that?" And again the smile twinkled in the old lawyer's eyes.

"All right," said Willis, trying to not appear rueful. "After we shall have discovered the lost tress, and brought it to you, what then?"

"What then! Zounds, man! the mystery will then be solved—the murderous miscreant in our clutch!"

His sudden energy imparted a more hopeful frame of mind to the young men.

"Anything more, sir?" Willis respectfully inquired.

"Yes. Next and last, go home and go to bed, both of you."

In this, at least, immediate and implicit obedience was accorded.

Ever since they had taken up their detective quest in common, Harold and Willis had been spending the night together, in one or another of their respective lodgings, as convenience might suggest.

It chanced that on this occasion they occupied separate beds in one large room of Harold Markoe's elegant and fashionable suit.

Harold was the first to awake on the following morning.

As Willis was still sleeping, he slipped noiselessly into the adjoining dressing-room, made his toilet, with the assistance of Peters, his valet, and then went out for a breath of fresh air.

Returning half-an-hour later, very much disturbed, and with a newspaper clutched in his hand, he found Willis, partly dressed, sitting on the side of his bed, with his eyes meditatively fixed upon a silver-hooped strong-box that was set under the one broad window of the sleeping apartment.

"It is infamous!" exclaimed Harold, dropping

desperately into a seat, and tossing the newspaper to his friend, who, however, remained preoccupied. "It's all out! The devil fly away with these newspaper reporters, who assuredly fly away with everything else!"

"With the devil, too, if they could keyhole his personal habits, or tackle him with a notebook," said Willis, abstractedly. "So it is all out, eh?"

"Yes."

"Well, I anticipated as much. Names mentioned?"

"In full!"

"But Helen's arrest not distinctly characterized as the true criminal being in custody?"

"Hardly that; but merely as the veiled woman in gray, answering the description in Mrs. Golightly's and Bridget McWaters's testimony."

"Ah! so a mere clew to, instead of a solution of, the Belgrade Murder Mystery?"

"Yes; but with all sorts of absurd theorizings, not to mention the worst feature—the crying publicity given to Helen Whitback through it all. But why don't you read it?"

"My dear boy, excuse my lack of enthusiasm; but, having dabbled in newspaper work myself, I have anticipated everything, even to the reportorial gush—'space-work,' the writer would call it—that doubtless accompanies the modicum of solid fact in the article."

"You have?"

"Yes; and, moreover, don't you see that I am occupied?"

Harold gave a discontented Humph!

"With gazing at vacancy!" he sneered.

"You mistake, my boy! not a vacancy, but at that silver-hooped little chest yonder."

"It is nothing."

"Excuse me. I think it is quite substantial. Odd, too, that it should never have arrested my attention before!"

"The chest?"

"Yes. Was it out of that the poniard was stolen with which the murder was committed?"

"Yes; but that is an old story."

"No matter; hand over the chest, my boy; but in the first place open it for me."

Harold did as he was requested, though in opening the casket, which was without any lock, he had a good deal of difficulty, by reason of the stiffness of the silver clasps and hinges, which compelled him to hug it tightly against his breast before loosening the lid.

"Ah," said Willis, taking the open box across his knees, but with scarcely a glance at its contents—antique weapons, ornaments, and other curios, collected during Harold's foreign travels; "thanks. It has no lock, I perceive."

"There was never any."

"But has there always existed the difficulty in opening it?"

"Always. But for the box itself being a fine specimen of old Florentine workmanship, I should long ago have discarded it on just that account."

"So; and the purloiner of the Venetian dagger (i. e., the murderer, or murderer's accomplice, in the Belgrade mystery) doubtless experienced the same difficulty in opening it?"

"He must have done so."

"Let me see; the poniard was the only article stolen out of this receptacle, if I remember rightly."

"That was all; though a considerable sum of money was at the same time taken out of my writing-desk yonder, which was forcibly broken open, as you perceive."

"Ah!"

"The poniard," Harold went on, "is still in the hands of the Police Department property clerk."

"Yes, yes; but I am chiefly interested in the clasps of this chest—in the difficulty of opening the lid, you understand."

"But I don't understand."

"You're going to, though. Look here."

Willis indicated some reddish woolen floss adhering to one of the clasps, which he had been examining intently.

"That is nothing," said Harold, indifferently.

"Nothing?"

"Well, then, only some floss rubbed from some one's garments in the attempt to force the lid."

"But not from *your* garments—from your waistcoat, for instance—in the attempt just made?"

"By no means." And Harold looked down over his person. "The colors are different."

"Exactly. Then this reddish floss was like enough rubbed from some garment worn by the last person before you that forced the lid."

"By Jove! that must have been the purloiner of the poniard," cried Markoe, beginning to stare.

By this time Willis was also getting excited.

"Are you sure?" he exclaimed.

"Dead sure, now that I reflect. The robber left the casket open after abstracting the poniard. On the following day it was closed by me, and has not been opened till the present time. I am sure of it, because Peters, who is very conscientious, would not have touched it, and there is no one else about my rooms."

Willis clapped his hands.

"Eureka!" he exclaimed.

"But what have we found?"

"A clew to the missing tress, in this bit of woolen floss!"

"What does it correspond with?"

"With the Fall overcoat that Hardman, the Texan, has worn ever since we have known him!"

"Ha! But how about the veiled murderess in gray, then?"

"He is doubtless her accomplice. Hurrah, my boy! He is the accomplice of his own wife, Claudia, the actual assassin, whom he is pretending to run to earth. Come; it is a deep game that Hardman is playing, but ours shall be all the deeper to circumvent him to his final undoing!"

CHAPTER XVI.

HELEN IN PRISON.

THE first step of the two friends, after a hurried breakfast that morning, was to visit Helen Whitback in her prison at Police Headquarters. She was rather comfortably lodged under the immediate supervision of Mrs. Wallace, the matron in charge of the Lost Children Department, though there were strong iron gratings to both the window and door of the apartment, to indicate that it was none the less a prison strong-room.

Much to the visitors' relief, the lovely captive consented to see them, without the least hesitation.

She even smilingly advanced to meet them, Mrs. Wallace having good-naturedly retired after setting out some chairs for the interview.

"Why, you're looking positively cheerful!" exclaimed Willis, shaking hands heartily, while Harold had been content to silently press the little hand extended to him. "We were afraid you would refuse us an audience."

Helen laughed.

"Why should I," she said, gayly, "when I have already granted interviews to half-a-dozen newspaper reporters?"

"What!" exclaimed Harold, indignantly; "have the indefatigable interviewers been at you?"

"Yes; but have no fear," said Helen, with her secret little smile. "If you can't get any more out of me than the gentlemen of the press did, you will be little the wiser."

"But how did you put them off?"

"By merely pointing that to them," (she indicated a pile of morning newspapers, bearing marks of having been industriously scanned,) and asking what they could possibly want with actual information, when their imaginations stood them in such glorious stead." And again her laugh, fresh, sweet and musical, rippled through the room.

"But," said Willis, after a pause, "we have determined to not even attempt to get anything out of you, at least for the present."

"What a relief! Don't you mark a renewed sparkle in my eyes, color in my cheeks, hope on my brow? Of course, in that case, you shall always be welcome, though of course also"—she cast her glance critically about the prison-room with a comical air—"the refinements of hospitality can scarcely be expected of me just now."

Harold's eyes followed her glance, and he could with difficulty suppress a groan, but Willis fully reflected his pretty cousin's cheerfulness.

"That is our determination," continued the latter. "As a reward for having taken it, however, we shall venture to ask a slight favor in return."

She grew a little graver, but nodded her sunny face, and said, "Yes?" inquiringly, with the best of good-nature.

"It is this," said Willis: That you will consent to listen to a history of the progress we have made in the case, and then permit us to ask for a suggestion or two."

Her woman's wit at once penetrated the elaborate trick that was about to be attempted, and she again laughed, this time in a way to make them somewhat disconcerted, but was, nevertheless, complacent.

"As to listening, granted," said she. "But as to the after-suggestions, time enough for them when they are formulated. I am now anxious for your joint history of How Not to Do It."

So she folded her arms, assumed a gracefully attentive attitude, and Willis began forthwith.

As a raconteur, Willis was thoroughly in his element, and to say that he did justice to himself on this occasion is tantamount to saying that he gave his docile listener a complete and detailed account of the young men's connection with the Belgrade-Hardman-Veiled Woman in Gray Mystery from A to Izzard.

But his listener was docile, and that was all; indeed, she seemed to be solely interested through politeness, just as though very little that was told so charmingly was particular news for her.

Nevertheless, she smiled sweetly when he had brought his elaborate tale to a close.

"Very nice, Cousin Willis," said she. "But still your history forcibly reminds me of a sarcastic book reviewer's comment on a certain volume that has been trying his patience."

"What may that comment have been, Cousin Helen?"

"It was something like this: 'The trouble with this work is, that what there is good in it is not new, and what there is new in it is not good.'

"Oh! ah! yes, you are right; quite sarcastic, I must say!"

And then both Willis and Harold looked decidedly glum, until Helen laughed again, saying, quite hopefully:

"But now for the suggestions. By all means, let me hear what you would suggest."

"But it is we, cousin, that hope for suggestions from you."

"Oh! Well then?"

"In the first place, then, can you suggest that Claudia Hardman may be the veiled murderess of Miss Hanshaw, and that Hardman, as her accomplice, stole Harold's dagger, with which the murder was committed, in order to possibly bring the crime home to Harold's door?"

There was a suspicious movement in the corners of Miss Whitback's pretty mouth, but otherwise her gravity was undisturbed.

"An odd sort of suggestion indeed, a catechetic one, it might be called," said she. "But while I am thinking this one over, suppose you discharge another at my understanding."

"With pleasure," said Willis, with business-like alertness. "In the second place, what would you suggest was the murderer's object in severing and carrying off a lock of the victim's hair?"

This was too much for the young woman's gravity, and she laughed unrestrainedly.

"What profound plotters you two are!" she exclaimed. "These bogus suggestions especially, how cunning and deep!"

"Bogus! Cunning! But in what way?"

"Ah! And if I were to answer them in full, and circumstantially, what would remain of my own secret, which I am so determined to preserve?"

Neither of the young men could abstain from looking a little guilty.

Helen arose, still smiling, to indicate that the interview was at an end.

"My mother and Mr. Sharp will be here presently," said she, gently.

Then, as they rose to depart, she seemed to take pity on their disconsolateness; at all events her face grew thoughtful and sympathetic.

"There are two things I would like to say, though, before we part," said she.

They looked up eagerly.

"One is a piece of advice. It is evident that by this time the man Hardman distrusts you thoroughly. Should the quarrel widen, and he wish to make a special appointment, promise me to fix the time and place as at sunset of this day, in a secluded glade surrounded by maples, just beyond the north wall of the great Central Park receiving reservoir, and about midway of its length."

They looked up in surprise, but most readily made the promise.

"The other," she continued, "is in the form of a promise—a conditional one—on my part."

A promise! Defeat was not then absolute, with such a jewel in prospect. Their eyes fairly danced with anticipation.

"It is this: The malignity of that man and that woman—they knew she meant Hardman and Mrs. Golightly—" may prove more dangerous than even Mr. Sharp or I can anticipate—so much so, in fact, as to make my continued detention here under this preposterous charge far more painful and burdensome than at present. In that case, visit me again, say, to-morrow evening at eight o'clock."

"Yes, yes!" they exclaimed in one breath; "and then?"

"You shall know all."

"What! all—the—mystery?"

"Alas! after I shall have told you my story, there will be no longer a mystery; and I think you will also fully justify me in keeping inviolate my secret as long as I have."

CHAPTER XVII.

THE MYSTERIOUS FIGURE AGAIN.

WITH this scarcely looked for prospect hugged to their bosoms, Willis and Harold separated from the mystery-fraught Helen Whitback very much as if walking on the air.

"We shouldn't have tried tricking her into unawares admissions," said Harold, on the way out of Headquarters. "It was so much labor thrown away."

"You're right," admitted Willis. "All we did get, after all, was what she fairly and freely chose to offer."

"Yes; women would make capital lawyers—and detectives, too, for that matter—if they averaged one tithe of Helen Whitback's penetration and general ability. Talk about a woman not being able to keep a secret, it is absurd! An oyster is positively confidential, compared with that young lady. But where are you going?"

"To the detective bureau," said Willis, who was leading the way through various corridors. "We must have the Texan's new address, and Heintzelman ought to know it."

But at this moment, as they were passing a doorway, they were accosted by no less important an individual than Master Hardman, Jr.

"Ah, gentlemen, well met!" piped up the lit-

the fellow, pushing back his stovepipe from his precocious brow. "My respected parent thought you might be found here, and accordingly I have a message for you."

He was smoking such an enormously disproportionate cigar that several officials had gathered in the adjacent doorways, apparently to admire his style.

"That is fortunate, my dear sir," said Willis, gravely, "for we were just bent on inquiring your respected parent's address."

Master Hardman expectorated most non-committally, dropped the starboard corner of his wizen mouth, and gently waited his cigar back and forth as "one of the finest" might his locust club in a period of midsummer night's reflection.

"Ah, ur, but!" he murmured diplomatically; "our address, eh? Well, the fact is, my dear chappies, perhaps it's new with the intention of remaining so, otherwise unknown, at least for the present. Eh? Understand?"

"What's your father's message, then?" broke in Harold, who was seized with an inordinate desire to spank some of the conceit out of the inordinate little cub on the spot. "Let his address remain in Jericho, for aught we care to the contrary!"

"Indeed! Oh, ah, indeed!" and a pair of eyeglasses were actually produced for an additional paralyzing effect. "I say, one of you men, there!" half-turning to the uniformed and grinning onlookers from the doorways; "just signal my coachman to drive up, will you? I may find the air somewhat more convenient in—ur!—Jericho." This with a sarcasm meant to be both subtle and severe.

"Why, certainly, Shanghai!" said one of them, a particularly gigantic patrolman, advancing with a mock-obsequious air that bent him half-double; "that is, if you'll only kindly inform my mates and me one thing—and we're not exactly hogs after information either."

Another wave of the disproportionate cigar, coupled with a condescending elevation of the miniature brows.

"What may that be, my good man?"

"Only this—at least for the present," with additional obsequiousness. "Does your mother know you're out?"

A roar of laughter from the assembled officials, which was hardly subdued by the effect of this joke upon the miniature Texan, extraordinary as that was.

He flushed like a hard-shell crab at the boiling, pounded his little hat on the back of his little head, flourished his huge cigar and tiny walking-stick severally, while hopping and dancing about the marble flagging very much like a bug in a skillet.

In fact, his access of fury would have been far other than a laughing matter, if there had only been a little more of him.

"An insult!" he squeaked, with a trickling small cascade of profanity that would have done credit to a cowboy on a spree; "and insult from a minion—a blue-coated, brass-buttoned mud-sill of the law! Condemn me, a deliberate insult!"

"A insult!" whined the towering cop, doubling himself up yet more deprecatingly. "A insult, when only his blessed monnmer was alluded to!"

"Sir!" sputtered the boy-man; "it is well for you that this indignity is attempted in New York, and not in the Lone Star State. Otherwise—he slapped his diminutive chest heroically—"it would be wiped out with your gore, sir"—with tragic hoarseness—"ay, sir, in your heart's wild gore, sir, though my life were the next instant's forfeit, sir!"

This time there was a combined yell of laughter, in which even Harold slightly joined, at the bantam's expense, but Willis maintained a sepulchral gravity through it all.

"May I deign to ask, sir," said he, humbly, "the nature of your good father's message for my friend and me?"

Hardman junior seemed to master his rage with a great effort.

"You may, sir, you may," he rather freezingly responded. "The head of my family tree, sir, regrets that he cannot see you in person earlier in the day, but requests that you will appoint an interview for a later hour."

"With pleasure," said the Rocket Detective, urbanely; and then, mindful of Helen's advice, he named the sunset hour and Central Park locality as already stated.

Hardman junior gave a parting wave of his ponderous cigar.

"The appointment shall be kept, sir," said he, with grandiloquent condescension. "Expect my sire on the spot at the vivid hour named—the Westerner's chosen hour—the gorgeous sunset's rapt magnificence and curtained pomp! Good-day, sir, and to your friend, sir. Sir"—with a last withering look at the still grinning policemen, and with a mournful emphasis—"the days of chivalry are past, and the voice of the mud-sill is rife in the land."

The little fellow then danced out of view, and as Willis and Harold were following him they encountered Heintzelman, the detective, who, however, could not enlighten them on the score of Hardman's new abiding-place.

"I only know the man slightly," said Heintzel-

man, "and he has kept as dumb as a fish as to his whereabouts. He swore out the warrant that I was so unfortunate as to have serve on the young lady last night, which is pretty much all I know about it."

"Will she have an examination soon?" asked Willis.

Heintzelman shook his head, as much as to say that there was some mystery about the affair, in which numerous more or less big guns were mixed up, and went his way.

The young men then gained the main corridor, and were about passing out at the chief or Mulberry street entrance, when a fresh surprise encountered them.

This was in the comely but not (to them) attractive form of Mrs. Jeannette Golightly, who, having just alighted from a coupe, was coming up the door-steps.

She started at seeing them, threw a particularly vengeful look at Harold, and then returned to address Harold.

"I am altogether unfamiliar in such localities, Mr. Markoe," said she. "Could you kindly direct me to the woman's prison?"

The young man responded coldly but courteously.

"What the deuce!" he muttered to Willis, as they were moving up the street, after passing the vehicle in waiting. "Can she have the ineffable cheek to demand an interview with Helen?"

"Like enough," was the abstracted reply. "You didn't take a look into the coupe I fancy?"

"No."

"I did. She left some one in waiting for her there."

"Who?"

"Hardman."

Harold stared.

"However, perhaps it isn't so singular," said he. "Shall we go back and speak to him?"

"Better not, I think. Time enough, if he should keep our appointment."

Harold drew a long breath, and he unconsciously gritted his teeth.

"I only hope so," he muttered.

They were close behind a graceful, dark-cloaked female figure, which they seemed to have seen glide out of the Headquarters basement offices, and which was moving rapidly toward a public hack that was waiting at the Bleeker street corner.

"That figure seems sort of familiar," whispered Willis. "Quick; let us overtake her."

But at this instant the figure suddenly turned and confronted them.

They reeled back, for the instant too much astonished for word, thought or action.

The dark cloak of the figure was open in front, thus betraying an identity.

It was the veiled woman in gray!

CHAPTER XVIII.

A MAD CHASE.

SHE stood there but a fleeting instant, during which they were vaguely conscious of a pair of particularly magnetic eyes gazing fixedly at them, but especially at Willis Hawley, through the pearly fleeciness of her veil.

Then, slipping a scrap of paper into Willis's hand, she turned, darting away, and was into the carriage on the street corner almost before they could realize what had chanced.

"Quick! after her!" gasped Willis, and the pair darted in pursuit just as the coach was whirled away toward the east side. "This one is the mysterious Claudia! I feel it in my bones."

A passing hansom was pressed into service, and the chase was kept up from the first jump, with the coach not more than a short block in the lead.

"Oh, curse it all!" exclaimed Harold, with a self-contemptuous clench of the hand; "why didn't we grasp her on the instant—when she stood there in our very power?"

"I don't know," grumbled his companion. "Why didn't you?"

"I was too much taken aback."

"Just my case. The woman seems a phantom—with a certain paralyzing effect on the nerves."

"I believe you."

"However, this time I hope we have her."

Vain hope!

The fugitive coach was momentarily out of sight as it turned into the Bowery southward.

Next moment, the two friends were tumbling out of the hansom, with a fleeting vision of the graceful cloaked figure vanishing up the steps of the down Elevated station at Houston street.

"We're in luck!" panted Willis, tossing the cabby his double fare, and following close on Harold's agile heels. "She can't very well disappear up yonder without breaking her neck."

A train was just on the move, and they were in time for another glimpse of her as she was stepping into the forward car.

Then the iron gates were closed behind her, but there was still opportunity for the next car behind, which the pursuers availed themselves of just as the train was starting.

The cars were uncomfortably crowded, chiefly with women bent on their morning shopping.

Consequently, there were a good many figures in dark cloaks, and graceful figures at that, but fortunately veiled faces were not so numerous.

The young men pushed their way through forward as rapidly as possible, scanning every passenger with lynx-eyed keenness, though quite certain that it was in the first car in which the fugitive had taken refuge.

In this one they were apparently more successful.

Several women, both sitting and standing, wore dark cloaks, but they presently located one, sitting in one of the forward corner seats.

True, her dark cloak enveloped her entire form, but a glimpse of gray veil was visible from under the rim of her bowed hat, and she also seemed to be breathing hard and trembling, as if newly arrived on board and in uncommon haste.

The friends exchanged a glance, and drew near, until standing almost directly over her.

Harold made a motion to touch the woman's shoulder, but a look from Willis restrained him.

There was a general air of mystery and perturbation about the bowed figure, and, moreover, there was the gray veil peeping out.

"Bide your time," said Willis's glance, almost as plainly as speech itself. "She is ours, so what more can we desire? Time enough to take her in custody at her next movement, without making a scene in the crowded car."

Harold nodded approvingly.

Then for the first time Willis recollected the paper that had been slipped into his hand, and which, in the excitement of the pursuit, he had hastily thrust into his waistcoat pocket.

He now produced it.

It contained some words, in a hastily disguised hand, which he perused with growing surprise and mystification before silently passing the slip to Harold.

The following was its purport:

"You seek for the severed and tell-tale tress. Look for it, if you have the opportunity, close to the crime-battlemented heart, and but little longer shall you be mystified by

"THE VAILED WOMAN IN GRAY."

Harold's astonishment was no less than his friend's.

He raised his eyes and made a significant motion, as much as to say:

"Let us not delay; now or never is the word."

Willis gave an assenting nod, but at that instant the train came to a pause at the Canal street station, and the object of their scrutiny calmly arose.

As she did so, her face was revealed without the least attempt at evasion.

The young men looked at each other in blank amazement.

It was the stolid face of a middle-aged German woman, whose rather piggish little eyes returned their stare with stupid resentment; the gray veil having been nothing more than an innocent accompaniment of her head-gear.

Just then a soft, silvery laugh from the rear end of the car called their attention to another figure, whose veiled face was turned mockingly toward them, in the act of tripping out upon the platform.

The draught from the open door blew the figure's dark cloak revealingly open.

It was the figure they had missed—the real veiled woman in gray.

The young men made a headlong rush in pursuit, but she had disappeared when they reached the car platform.

Moreover, the gates had been shut, and the train was again on the move.

No matter. Over the iron barriers they bounded, one after the other, like sheep over a pasture rail, and at imminent risk of breaking their limbs.

However, they managed to land on the station platform just as the end guard-rail was cleared by the now whizzing train, and then barely succeeded in catching and steadying each other in time to avoid an awkward tumble.

"What's up with you fellers?" roared the democratic gateman, indignantly. "Are you drunk or intoxicated? I'll have you took in by the perlice!"

But they did not wait to resent his impertinence, and the next instant were flying down the steps.

Too late again!

They were only in time to see the object of their pursuit step lightly into a coach, which was almost at the same instant started off westward along Canal street at a rattling pace.

Harold gritted his teeth, but his companion had already signaled a disengaged hansom, with the peremptoriness that cabmen can so readily respond to on occasion.

They sprang from the bottom of the station-steps directly into its opportune embrace, the magic words, "Double fare if you overtake the coach directly ahead!" were spoken, and they were scarcely settled in their seats before the chase was renewed.

"Why the deuce did you interfere in the car?" groaned Harold, peevishly. "I could have put my hand on her."

"Zounds, man! yes, on the Dutchwoman!"

"But wouldn't that have shown us our mis-

take, so that we could have turned our cheated attention elsewhere?"

"Doubtless. Oh, the road to every failure is full of 'ifs,' my boy! But is it worth while to recriminate?"

Then they both burst out laughing, and clasped hands most cordially.

"Cheer up!" said Willis, hopefully. "See, we're pushing bravely, if not positively overhauling, the fugitive vehicle. Jack-a-lantern as our veiled friend is, we may yet overtake her."

"If not arrested for fast-driving in the mean time."

"Nonsense! the coach ahead is in the first danger on that score, besides being the more unwieldy. Ha! there it turns down Broadway. Cabby," to the driver behind, "remember your instructions!"

"Hall right, sir!" sung back the cabman, who was a cockney. "I'll 'ave the differ dead to rights, or there sha'n't be a wheel 'angin' together beneath yer!"

And he also turned down Broadway with a dangerous rush.

Willis gave a triumphant exclamation, and pointed out ahead.

The fugitive coach was at a dead stop at the Lispenard street crossing, with one of its horses down on his side, and the usual knot of loungers and sight-seers in attendance.

"Wait right here!" commanded Willis, to the cabman, as the hansom was pulled up almost on top of the unfortunate coach.

Then he hopped out on one side, as Harold did on the other.

To spring across the short intervening space and tear open the coach-doors was the work of an instant.

The interior was empty.

The coachman looked up with a champion grin, from his grasp of the fallen horse's head.

"One minute, gents," said he. "This slippery-heeled critter 'll be up in a second or two, an' then I'm at your service."

The crowd gave a guffaw and a jeer, and a policeman was already brandishing his club and talking angrily from the sidewalk, while the interrupted traffic of the thoroughfare was in a momentarily increasing uproar.

Again that soft, silvery, mocking laugh!

Once more they saw her, this time in the act of slipping into a fresh coach, a little lower down Broadway.

Willis signaled the hansom driver once more.

Again they were on board, and yet again they were in chase.

Down the busy and thronged chief thoroughfare, in and out of the mob of miscellaneous vehicles, now for an uninterrupted range of a block or two, then again tortuously pursued, like the course of a frantic but wounded snake, and quite as often almost inextricably locked up in a characteristic "jam," was the exciting chase kept up.

At last, however, the coach was seen to stop before a tall and familiar business building, into which the veiled woman in gray was observed to vanish, after flitting across the breadth of sidewalk like a phantom, the coach that had brought her immediately driving off down the street.

But Willis and Harold were already out of the hansom, and almost on the woman's heels.

It was in the large building containing Lawyer Sharp's office.

"Quick!" gasped Willis; "you one way, I the other!"

He darted up the main stairway, from which he could also keep the elevator partly in sight, while Harold hurriedly made the detour leading to the back stairway, which would carry him to the side-door of Sharp's private office.

Willis was sure he had not wasted an instant of time when he suddenly burst into the outer office.

It contained only the three clerks, with whom he was acquainted, but no other person.

"A card, sir, just left for you and Mr. Markoe!" exclaimed the head clerk, starting from his chair.

"Left by whom?"

"By a lady, sir—one of—the clients."

"What lady?"

"I don't know her name, sir; a lady in a dark cloak, but otherwise in gray, and wearing a gray veil."

CHAPTER XIX.

THE VAILED WOMAN'S WARNING.

WILLIS, still breathing hard, held in his hand the prettily tinted addressed envelope that had been placed therein by the obliging clerk.

"A veiled lady in gray?" he repeated mechanically.

"Yes, sir."

"Be quick; where is she?"

"She is gone."

"Which way?"

"Through the private consultation-room, sir. She said she would pass down the back stairs for a change."

But the last words were lost upon the Rocket Detective, who had bounded into the private office as if impelled by electric springs.

It was empty, but the side-door was still ajar.

Ah! she had then escaped, but doubtless only to rush into the clutch of the vigilant Markoe just on the outside.

Yes; as if to lend color to this foregone conclusion, there were even then sounds of a scuffle going on out there, and then once again the rippling echoes of that soft and silvery laugh.

In another instant Willis was beyond the side-door, where an unlooked-for revelation confronted him.

The owner of the laugh had again disappeared, though the origin of the scuffling sounds was sufficiently apparent.

It was caused by Harold Markoe and the janitor of the building, a herculean negro in red-trimmed blue livery, locked together in a most terrific and unseemly struggle; wherein, however, most of the fighting was being done by the young gentleman, who seemed frantically determined to rush down the stairs, while his antagonist seemed equally determined, though in a better natured way, to prevent him.

"You sha'n't foller de liddy, sah!" the Colossus was saying. "It's dead ag'in' de rules ob de buildin', an' I'se de janitor, 'sponsible to de proprietah."

"Let me go, you black ruffian!" roared Harold, fairly gnashing his teeth, and yet making but little impression on the ponderous strength that restrained him. "You shall answer for this, curse you! if it costs me ten years' income. Unhand me, I say!"

Here Willis, accompanied by the head clerk, who had also been attracted by the contentious sounds, hurried forward.

Explanations followed, and Harold, unhurt but much flustered, was released, while the janitor was correspondingly scared and repentant.

"Fore de Lord!" gasped the latter, "I didn't mean no hurt. De lady, she looked so 'larned, an' den de young gentleman he grab at her, an' den when de liddy 'pealed to me—"

"Hold your tongue!" said Markoe, savagely.

"You couldn't help blundering like a fool, and that's an end of it."

"What's to be done?" demanded Willis.

"Nothing now," growled Harold, with a last savage look at the contrite dandy, as he took his friend's arm on the way down-stairs.

"She slipped by you, then?" said Willis, when they were out of hearing.

"Not by me, but out of my very clutch!" was the bitter response. "Did you hear her good-bye laugh?"

"Yes."

"I had her in my very grasp! But for that fool's intermeddling, I would at least have torn off her veil!"

"It can't be helped now," said Willis, with a sigh. "By the way, here is something she left for us."

He held up the envelope.

"It was neatly addressed with both their names, in a handwriting that neither could recognize."

They opened it with devouring curiosity. Its contents were—two blank cards.

"Hallo!" was Willis's sole comment, as he passed them to his companion.

"Her refinement of contempt for us," exclaimed Harold, bitterly; and he was in the act of tearing up the cards, when Willis, with a sudden after-thought, restrained him.

"What are you doing?" asked Harold.

Willis had come to a pause under a window, and was holding up the cards, which were of the most delicate Bristol-board, in a strong shaft of sunshine, while scrutinizing them intently.

"Wait!"

He stepped aside, lighted a taper match, and carefully subjected the surface of the cards to its gentle heat.

"Aha!" he said, triumphantly; "it is as I hoped!"

"What have you found?"

"Sympathetic ink!"

Harold started.

"Come," said Willis, briskly. "A much stronger heat is required to bring out the concealed writing. I'll manage it. Luncheon is in order, any way, and I am hungry in a double sense."

"So am I," said Harold, by this time equally interested. "How would some oysters in a chafing-dish go?"

"Just what I was thinking of!" cried Willis, slapping him on the back. "If oysters are excellent at this season, the alcohol flame under a big chafing-dish is yet better."

In a few minutes the cards were accordingly put to the test in a private room of a neighboring restaurant.

The sympathetic ink writing was brought out pretty clearly; that on one card reading:

"Beware of the Texan, whatever else you do; he is as treacherous as he is daring and dangerous."

The other card was more closely written, to the following effect:

"Where the Texan is, the missing tress, shorn from the murdered woman's scalp, is not far distant. Be constantly on your guard, even in following him up; he has at his secret call desperadoes as fierce and unscrupulous as himself, even in the heart of this great city. If ever hard-pressed by him, put

this query to him: 'How about the Brotherhood of the Scalp-Lock, to which you belong?' Beware also of the boy, who is much older than he seems, and full of guile."

That was all.

In both cases the handwriting was the same, to all appearances a studiously disguised hand.

"Well," said Willis, with much satisfaction, "something at least has come of our otherwise fruitless morning chase." And he proceeded to burn the cards over the remnants of the chafing-dish flame.

"That is true," said Harold. "And you do well to destroy the communications, now that we have mastered them."

"Certainly; for it was evidently a fear of their falling into Hardman's hands that prompted the extreme caution by which they have been conveyed to us."

"Yes; it would almost seem that the veiled woman in gray had led us on this mad and delusive shadow-hunt for the very purpose of leaving these mysterious hints in our hands. What do you think of it all?"

Willis paused reflectively, and then drew a long breath.

"I have a somewhat new theory," said he. "But it can be briefly stated."

"State it, then."

"First, this veiled woman in gray (the plagiaristic Helen being in prison), is evidently the real Claudia Hardman."

"Agreed."

"Secondly, she is not friendly to Hardman, by any means."

"Equally evident."

"Thirdly, lastly, and ergo, Hardman is most likely himself the murderer of Arabella Hانشaw, and this mysterious Claudia, perhaps after being an unwilling witness of the crime, is now equally interested in keeping out of his way and bringing him to justice."

"I agree with you," said Harold, heartily. "This would explain the zeal of Hardman's pursuit of his wife on a very different basis from what he has pretended it to be. To bring her to justice must be his remotest thought; to destroy her, as being the sole witness of his crime, his ever-present motive."

Exactly. And does it not follow that from this time forth we should pursue the woman, not as our quarry, but to make friends with her—common cause, you know?"

"Yes; but know this as she must have done, why should she have so persistently eluded us, doubtless with Helen Whitback's assistance, in the duality of costume?"

"Wouldn't our heretofore association with Hardman have forced her to such a line of action?"

"Yes; I see that now. Well, what is our next step?"

"To keep our appointment with Hardman," said Willis, rising, and consulting his watch. "But it is as yet only half-past two."

"No matter. I'll tell you what we'll do. I'll telegraph to Peters to meet us at the Fifth avenue entrance to Central Park with my dog-cart, and we'll set out forthwith. It won't be far from sundown when we reach the rendezvous, and my Cockney will be an excellent auxiliary in case of hard knocks."

"Good!" said Willis, as they quitted the place, after settling for the oysters; "and the situation is oddly enough changed. We are now to run down the Texan, as a means to winning the confidence of the veiled woman in gray."

"In order," added Harold, "to finally clear up the Belgrade mystery."

Peter was found waiting for them at the Central Park entrance, and, though it was half an hour before sunset when they dismounted in the vicinity of the maple-girl dell at the north end of the great reservoir, they saw two persons approaching the same place from the west side, along the embankment promenade, whom they recognized as the two Hardmans, father and son.

"Nothing very formidable, so far," commented Harold; and, giving orders to Peters to keep the horse exercising in the vicinity, the two friends moved briskly toward the glade.

The elder Texan greeted them with an odd smile as he approached.

"A charming spot," he said, surveying the surroundings, after a curt nod. "Allow me to ask what suggested it to you as fit for our present meeting?"

CHAPTER XX.

A MOMENTOUS ADVENTURE.

It was, indeed, a charming and secluded spot, whose precincts they were now entering.

It was an oval-shaped little grassy and rocky glade, almost wholly shut in by beautiful maple trees, then in all the rich red-and-yellow gorgeousness of their autumnal foliage, through the stems of which upon either side could be obtained stray glimpses of the encircling well-kept but little-frequented drive.

Without such stray glimpses, indeed, the little picnic-ground, for it had obviously been designed for that, was so lonely and savage in its suggestions as to have caused more than a passing wonder at its being merely a feature of the

great metropolitan pleasure-ground, instead of some wild, hill-infolded glade far from the busy haunts of men.

"The locality is new to us, no less than to yourself, Hardman," said Willis, in answer to the Texan's opening query. "It was suggested to us, as fit for our present interview, by—a lady."

The Texan gave a slight start, but only said "Oh!" indifferently, and continued to lead the way, with the ridiculous little epitome of southwestern manhood at his side, until a pause was made among some loose-strewn mossy and vine-dressed rocks almost in the center of the glade.

"You, at all events," said he, in a sneering tone, "have had the prudence to have a witness of our meeting at hand."

And he indicated Markoe's valet, who could be seen occasionally through glimpses of the maples to one side.

"And you, too, my dear sir," was the bland retort of Willis, who had been equally observant on his part, "seem to have not neglected a like precaution."

Then, in his turn, he indicated an open coach, containing a fashionable-dressed woman, glimpses of which under a similar course of quiet exercising were observable on the other side.

Hardman scowled without answering.

"Why, it's Jeannette Golightly!" exclaimed Harold, with pretended surprise. "One would know the flutter of her particular fuss and feathers a mile away."

The Texan suddenly wheeled upon him in an access of rage, but whether forced or natural it was hard to say.

"You, Markoe—you're meat for me, if you wish it!" he hoarsely exclaimed. "Is this appointment meant for a scrimmage or a conference—which?"

Harold brought his fashionable eye-glass to bear on him with a lazy sort of scrutiny.

"Excuse me, sir," he drawled out, coldly, "you may not know it, but you are talking very like a fool."

The Texan glared, and the hard, venomous look that it was not good to see came into his face and eyes.

"Explain yourself," said he. "Men where I come from weigh their epithets well before applying them to me."

"But I don't come from where you do. Really, you ought to know that."

"Oh, this won't do!" said Willis, temporizingly. "It seems to me you both ought to have more sense. I supposed we were met here to try and understand one another."

Here a new diversion was introduced, quite unexpectedly, by the junior Hardman, who suddenly gave a shrill little whoop and began jumping up and down like a dancing-jack at a raree show.

"Whoop!" he squeaked, suddenly producing in some mysterious way an enormous revolver, seemingly half as big as himself, and flourishing it idiotically over his head with both hands; "be it gore or argument, count me in!"

Both Willis and Harold roared with laughter—it was impossible for them to do otherwise—but the senior Texan seemed to see nothing whatever comical in the warlike demonstration on the part of his reduced edition, and merely laid his hand deprecatingly on the red-hot little fellow's shoulder.

"Oh, I'm game, pop!" chirped the latter, looking up into his senior's face. "You know me of old. Touch and go's the word when gas—I repeat the word, sir—g-a-s—is in the air!" And he wound up with a contemptuous gesture toward Harold that was no less amusing than his Lilliputian pugnacity had been.

Willis put his arm through Hardman's with a conciliating smile.

"Come, let us talk sense," said he.

"I'm willing enough," growled the other. "But not the shadow of a reflection must be cast upon the noble fair lady under my protection."

Willis looked honestly puzzled.

"I really beg pardon," said he, "but what 'noble fair lady' do you allude to?"

"To the lady yonder," with much loftiness of manner.

"To Mrs. Golightly?"

"Yes."

"The pretty widow?"

"Yes, I tell you!"

"Oh!"

"Sir," with increased loftiness, "the lady will vouchsafe one day to become my wife!"

Harold was now a sharer of Willis's unaffected surprise.

"Why, no reflections have been made against the widow, Hardman," said he. "But—really your announcement is somewhat mystifying."

"In what way?"

"Why, how can she become Mrs. Hardman, you know?"

"What's to prevent?"

"Your present wife, Claudia, you know."

Hardman shrugged his shoulders.

"Do you think I'm a fool? Claudia is dead."

"Dead?" exclaimed the two friends, staring at him.

"That is, there's every reason to believe so,"

the Texan went on, hastily. "Why doesn't she turn up, if she's alive? At all events, I'm about to advertise, and find out one way or the other."

"But this is madness!" said Willis. "If Claudia is dead, who, except perhaps *yourself*—and, half-banteringly as he emphasized the exception, Hardman started as if he had been struck—"could have murdered Arabella Hanshaw?"

"Miss Helen Whitback, as a matter of course," replied the Texan, with fierce collectedness.

Harold in turn shrugged his shoulders, being even too contemptuous for anger.

"Why, man alive, you must be insane!" said Willis, almost laughing.

"Am I? Well, I'll bring it home to her, just the same. My poor murdered sister-in-law—that boy's murdered aunt—shall be avenged, never fear."

This was too much.

"I don't believe that *you* believe a word of such bosh!" said Harold, abruptly.

"What do you mean? Do you doubt that Arabella Hanshaw was my sister-in-law?"

"Not at all. But that she was also that cub's aunt is too preposterous."

Another screech from the junior Hardman, with accompanying martial and Terpsichorean demonstrations.

"Revenge or blood!" vociferated the little fellow. "Out of the way, pop! He called me a cub—he dies!"

"Oh, look here," interposed Willis, impatiently, "this has gone far enough, Hardman, and you ought to see it, for you are no man's fool in other things. What did you bring this shrimp along for? Either stop his noise, or send him away."

"Shrimp! Death of my life, that's worse yet! Out of the way, pop! Elbow-room for carnage! Or just hold me by the tail while I eat him up."

The huge revolver was somehow flourished with one hand now, while a bowie-knife of no less formidable proportions was brandished just as ludicrously with the other.

But that Master Cowby was not altogether a farce was soon apparent.

A robin, pert-eyed and golden-breasted, ran along the smooth sward twenty or thirty paces away. Crack went the revolver, and the bird flew this way and that, literally blown to flinders by the ounce or more of lead that struck it.

A bushy-tailed gray squirrel was darting up a tree-trunk almost as far away an instant later. Whiz! Crash! The immense knife, dextrously cast by a turn of the apparently puny wrist, flew from the little hand like a bolt from a bow-gun, and the fleeing rodent was transfixed.

"There, sirs!" said Hardman, as the performer of these really extraordinary feats slowly strode away to recover his knife, while causing his young cannon to disappear somewhere in his clothing. "My son may be small, but, as you see, he might be something more than despicable on occasion."

"You're right," said Willis, smiling. "The tricks were worthy of a public exhibition. But all the more reason, allow me to observe, for the young man to be—set aside."

"He shall not annoy you further, at least not for the present."

Hardman made a sign, and the boy drew off in the direction of Mrs. Golightly, with a step that was meant to be majestic.

"Now, sir," said the Texan, turning to Harold, "perhaps you will be good enough to explain your words."

"Which ones do you mean?" said Harold, coldly. "The words regarding the youth's relationship to Miss Hanshaw?"

"Yes."

"I merely said she couldn't possibly have been his aunt."

"Why not?"

"According to your own showing, Claudia was married to you less than ten years ago."

"True."

"Well, the boy is sixteen years old, if an hour."

"You're mistaken, sir. He is less than nine."

Harold merely bowed politely.

"Of course, your word for it is enough for us," said he, gravely. "But I fear you will find difficulty in proving it, should a division of the estate be in dispute."

"I'll take my chances as to his getting Claudia Hardman's share, and don't you forget it," said the Texan, coarsely. "And as to bringing the murder home to Miss Whitback (who had as much at stake in Miss Hanshaw's death as Claudia had, for that matter,) I haven't shown my full hand yet, by a long shot."

He spoke with a self-confidence that disagreeably recalled to both young men certain words of Helen at parting with them—"The malignity of that man and that woman may prove more dangerous than even Mr. Sharp or I can anticipate."

"We don't care what sort of hand you may have in reserve," said Willis, irritably. "Your entire charge against the young lady is too insanely preposterous on its very face to merit a serious thought."

"Ah, you think so?"

"How can it be otherwise? If not as preposterous as I say, who, then, was the other veiled woman in gray who appeared in the cemetery, while Helen, dressed in black, was one of the beholders?"

"How should I know? Doubtless, an accomplice, gotten up especially for our mystification."

"Indeed! But does that explain your noticeably painful agitation at the sight of that veiled woman in gray, which surely Miss Whitback herself, though similarly costumed, could not possibly have inspired?"

Hardman started.

"My agitation?" he repeated.

"Yes; and not noticeable for the first and only time, either."

"Ha!"

"You were also livid on the first day of our giving the woman chase in your company right here in this Park, when she was in the Victoria."

"This is folly!"

"Is it? But the same deadly fear, or excitement, was a third time upon you when you again caught a glimpse of her in Mr. Sharp's consultation room."

"'Tis false, or my looks belied me!"

"Hardly possible, since your agitation was as patent to Markoe and the lawyer as it was to me."

"It is not so! By Heaven, I have never manifested the slightest trepidation in that mysterious presence! If she were to appear before us at this moment, I would prove to you—"

The words perished on his lips, and he staggered back with a glare, for at that instant she was before him; gliding slowly out from behind one of the mossy rocks, and confronting him statuesquely, with one finger raised warningly against her veiled lips.

But the man's consternation was rather that of the hunted wolf than of the startled deer.

"Witch! sorceress!" he gasped, gnashing his teeth, and springing forward; "it shall be now or never!"

CHAPTER XXI.

RINGING BLOWS.

BUT she evaded his rush by swiftly gliding back behind the rock, whence she seemed to disappear as mysteriously as though she had melted into the air.

"Why didn't you spring for her, too?" cried the Texan, with a desperate effort at self-control. "Have you lost all interest in running her down?"

Willis signed to Harold to let him do the talking.

"As an enemy, perhaps we have," he replied, coldly. "As a possible witness against the real murderer of the Belgrade Mystery, perhaps our interest in that particular fugitive is unabated."

"As a witness!" Hardman repeated slowly. "What can you be driving at?"

"Let me question you," said Willis, impressively. "Why, if you believe Miss Whitback guilty, should *you* care to lay your hands on the veiled fugitive who was just before us?"

"To break up the double masquerading. This one may have been an accomplice in the crime."

"But not in the identity of Claudia Hardman?"

"Yes—no! How should I know?"

"But you declared Claudia dead."

"I said I thought it likely."

"But, with such uncertainty, hadn't you better take the fair and complaisant Golightly, your prospective second wife, into your confidence?"

The Texan made a frantic gesture, but his inquisitor was inexorable.

"Besides," the latter went on, "there is your undue excitement, as just manifested, to be explained."

"Indeed!"

"To be sure. You don't deny your perturbation of three minutes ago, I presume?"

"No, I don't."

"You never manifested the like in the presence of the real murderess, as you pretend Miss Whitback to be; why then this panic in the presence of a mere accomplice?"

"It's none of your business, anyway!"

"My man, we're going to make it steadily our business."

"You'll intermeddle with me at your peril!" Hardman growled. "For neither of you, or for both combined, do I care that!" And he snapped his fingers.

"You're rather tangled up, aren't you?"

"Not by a long sight! What do you know about me, anyway?"

"Not much, certainly, since it's only what we have your word for; and yet—"

Willis came to a studied pause, and with one of his inscrutable smiles, just visible amid the thickening dusk.

Hardman's hand was seen to glide toward his hip-pocket with the stealthiness of a white serpent, and yet was the panic once more struggling in his dark face.

"Well, go on!" he roared, with a fresh oath.

"What more do you know about me?"

"Just so much, Mr. Hardman," said the detective, very slowly, "as to have an appetite for more—as to desire to put a single question to you."

"Out with it, and be hanged to you! What is the question?"

It came with deadly distinctness.

"How about the Brotherhood of the Scalp-Lock, to which you belong?"

Hardman reeled back with a sort of inarticulate roar.

But in another instant the barrel of his revolver flashed in the gloom.

"Die, wretch!" he gnashed out between his grinding teeth. "You know too much already!"

Crack went the weapon, but without effect, inasmuch as it was at the same instant knocked into the air by the veiled woman in gray, who had again slipped into view from behind the rock.

The next instant, in spite of her phantom-like agility, she was in the Texan's infuriated grasp.

"Goblin, or will-o'-the-wisp!" he roared; "this time I have you, though you be risen from the dead against me."

But before he could harm her, or even tear off her veil, Willis was upon him like a tiger, crying out as he made the spring:

"Look out for the cub, Harold! I'll manage the parent brute!"

The warning was timely enough, for, bang, whiz! rung at that instant a bullet from the "cub's" young cannon close by Harold's ear; Mrs. Golightly was squawking, "Help! murder!" from the open carriage; and Hardman, Junior, no less plucky than precocious, was paddling toward the scene of contention as fast as his little legs could carry him, while cocking his huge pistol for a fresh shot.

But Peters, at that instant opportunely swooped upon the younger Hardman from the maples to the left, disarming and carrying him off his feet with a Cockney rush.

This was fortunate, for "Quick, Harold, quick!" called out Willis again at that instant.

"The tress, the severed tress! Remember the warning. Where the Texan is, the severed tress is not far distant. Quick, be quick!"

The veiled woman had again disappeared, and Willis had the Texan down on his back.

Markoe sprung to his chum's assistance, and the next instant he was tearing open the Texan's waistcoat, in the hope of coming upon the missing tress, while Willis devoted himself to overcoming the fellow's struggles.

At last he drew from Hardman's bosom a flat package from which, as the wrappings were disarranged in his hand, a long luxuriant tress of woman's hair came tumbling and streaming out.

But there was a muttered oath from behind, then a sudden blow on the back of the head, and, as the treasured tress was torn from his grasp, he partly lost consciousness.

Willis was also suddenly "knocked out" by an equally dastard and unexpected blow from somewhere in the gloom, while a deep voice growled out the ominous words, "The Brothers of the Scalp-Lock assist each other!" and the contest was ingloriously at an end.

For when the young men recovered from the unseen attack, a few minutes later, Peters, the valet, was gazing stupidly at them, holding his head with both hands, and the entire Hardman party, including Mrs. Golightly and their equipage, had disappeared.

CHAPTER XXII.

HELEN'S CONDITIONAL PROMISE.

FORTUNATELY, the dog-cart, which Peters had halted in the driveway, had not been interfered with, and in a few minutes the discomfited trio were on their way home.

"This is lucky for us," commented Willis, when they were fairly started. "We're by no means so badly off as might be."

"I should say so!" said Markoe, gruffly. "What is our next step, old fellow?"

"Home for dinner, should our craniums prove intact," was the philosophical reply.

"But, how well the veiled woman has proved our friend!" said Harold. "But for her timely interposition, the Texan's bullet might have been in your breast. Let us speak of her as Claudia, for none other can she be."

"Agreed; though there are still some grounds against such a presumption. However, the woman's intimacy with Helen Whitback can no longer be doubted. Indeed, they must be in constant communication with each other."

"Evidently. The fact of our appointment with Hardman, at Helen's suggestion, proves that."

"Yes, and Claudia's sympathetic ink warnings to us all pointed to the same conclusion."

"Then what are your remaining grounds against the presumption that she is Claudia?"

"Well, if Hardman is her sister's murderer, why doesn't she denounce him at once to the authorities and have done with it, instead of coming and going in this hunted-hare, will-o'-the-wisp fashion, to no purpose?"

"Well, in the first place, the man, howsoever criminal, is still her husband."

"Yes."

"In the second place, she was doubtless a

fugitive from his brutality for some time prior to the murder."

"Yes; we may accept that much as truth out of Hardman's original story to us—setting down the rest, of course, as a pure fabrication."

"Well, then, he may still inspire her with a deadly fear of his vengeance."

"Oh, dash it all! Nothing will ever be clear till Helen vouchsafes to open her lips."

"Or, till Lawyer Sharp decides to tell what he knows."

"And he will not do that till the severed tress is in his possession."

"While Helen may open her lips to-morrow night, should Hardman succeed in making her position unbearable in the mean time."

"Which he isn't likely to be able to do, in my opinion. However, let us visit both Helen and Sharp again this evening."

This was agreed upon, and an hour or so later, the young men again sent in their names to the young woman in custody.

Mrs. Whitback, who was with her daughter, retired in Mrs. Wallace's company as they entered.

Helen received her visitors with much more reserve than in the morning, for which they were at a loss to account.

However, she listened to the exciting story of their adventures with seemingly absorbing interest, though without comment.

"You must have foreseen a good deal of what really happened to us, Helen," said Willis.

"The man or woman is wise who can foresee anything nowadays," was the quiet reply.

"Still, don't you think Mrs. Golightly's part in the affair particularly outrageous?"

"For her? Not at all."

"Do you still apprehend that Hardman may give you fresh trouble?"

"Yes."

"What! after his experience with us this afternoon?"

"It will not deter him." Then with sudden passion and even terror: "Seek him no more—Harold, Willis, both, seek him no more, I beseech you! Leave him to me—we shall manage to circumvent him, but he may be the death of you!"

They looked at her in eager astonishment, but she was once more taciturn, and no amount of urgent questioning, as to the details of her warning, could elicit anything further from her.

"Come to-morrow night," was the substance of all she would say. "I do not forget my conditional promise to you."

They next called on Sharp.

"It's a pity you couldn't have brought me that tress of hair," was the old lawyer's sole response, after smilingly listening to the story of their adventures. "Then all might have been made clear. Better luck next time. Good-night."

"It's too bad!" grumbled Willis, when the street corner was reached where Harold and he were for the first time to separate that night, this having been decided on by way of a change in the programme.

Here they were interrupted by a *coupe*, out of which the junior Hardman popped his little head, coming to a halt close by.

"Ah, gentlemen, well met again!" piped the little fellow. "I have a message for you."

"What is it?" said Harold.

"My worthy parent thinks some explanation is due you from him."

"I should say so."

"Ahem! He'll meet you on the Battery seawall to-morrow at three p. m., where, in the magnificent presence of Liberty Enlightening the World, revelations of an important nature may be in order. Gentlemen, you have heard. Is it agreed?"

"Yes."

"Driver, a light for my cigar. So! Gentlemen, good-night. Drive on!"

He was driven away.

Abstaining from any further comment than was embodied in a wondering laugh, the friends separated with the understanding that they should breakfast together at their club on the following day.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A MIDNIGHT VISITOR.

THERE had been much rainy and foggy weather during the week, one of whose days had been signalized by the inauguration ceremonies over the colossal statue of Liberty Enlightening the World, and the weather was still warm, moist and sultry to an uncomfortable degree.

At two or three in the morning Harold suddenly awoke, with a strange sense of danger in the air, and also with a sickish, sweetish smell in the room, as if he were being anaesthetized.

With his faculties alert, he found himself incapable of movement.

After vainly essaying to break through the physical petrification that possessed him, he tried to call out to Peters, but could not.

At this instant, a figure, stealthily climbing up from the garden, darkened the moonlight, and then rather floated than stepped into the room.

It was the figure of a veiled woman in gray.

She glided across the room to the couch, and, on perceiving that its occupant was awake, slowly drew from her bosom a poniard.

Harold was more astonished than terrified.

The weapon was his own—the same Venetian poniard with which the murder of the Belgrade had been committed, and which should now be in the possession of the police department property clerk.

"Why are you here?" exclaimed Harold, in the whisper that was solely vouchsafed him. "My friend and I had begun to think that you were friendly to us."

"Friendly!" It was a soft voice that now for the first time made response from under the veil. "Ah, yes; if you cease to pursue me. Otherwise—look! I can pass anywhere to your side, to the side of your friend."

"Still, you are not friendly to Hardman?" Harold went on. "That was made apparent to us."

Hardman! She did not reply in words, but a convulsive movement of her frame was expressive of intense hatred and fear at the mere mention of his name.

"Be frank with my friend and me, and you shall not be pursued," continued Harold, soothingly.

"Not even if confessedly guilty of Arabella Hanshaw's murder?" The words came in a hoarse, anxious whisper.

"Answer me first one question truly, and I will reply to you," said Harold, after a reflective pause.

"What is it?"

"Are you Claudia Hardman?"

"Yes."

"It is you who have reduced me to my present paralyzed condition?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"Through a subtle drug, the effects of which will gradually wear away, leaving you no worse than before."

"Your object?"

"To make sure of my own safety."

"Well, why do you visit me now?"

"For two reasons. To show you my power, and to warn you still further against Hardman."

"Thanks. We are already beholden to you for the timely warnings written in the sympathetic ink."

A start, as of supreme astonishment, on the part of the veiled figure.

"Ah! you found them of advantage to you, then?"

"You must know that we did."

"True; but in what particular way did my warning disconcert him?"

"It was at Willis's mention of the words supplied by you that Hardman was chiefly panic-stricken—those words, 'How about the Brotherhood of the Scalp-Lock, to which you belong?'"

For a moment the veiled figure seemed almost overcome by a painful agitation.

"True, true!" as if recovering herself. "Well, proceed."

"You are Claudia?"

"Yes."

"Are you the mother of the precocious boy with Hardman—the old-young imp whom he calls Cowby?"

"Yes."

"His own mother?"

"Yes."

"You astonish me!"

"Why?"

"You have been married to Hardman less than ten years."

"Ah, I understand; and the boy seems mature. Well, he is simply old-young, as you say; not more than nine."

"But this is opposed to another item of your sympathetic ink warning."

"Indeed!"

"Yes; therein you distinctly warned us to also beware of the boy, who, you said, was far older than he appeared."

"Did I so?"

"You ought to remember. This grows more and more puzzling."

"I do remember now. But I wrote in passion and hatred."

"Of your own son?"

"Yes; husband and child, I have cause enough to hate them equally."

"You fled from their brutality, then?"

"Yes."

"Who murdered Arabella Hanshaw?"

There was a pause, and the answer came, faint and trembling, but distinctly audible:

"I, Claudia Hardman, was my sister's actual murderer!"

"You your sister's assassin!"

"Yes," calmly enough now.

"And Hardman, what of him?"

"He was the witness of the crime."

"Tell me the story."

"It is brief. I was and am the veiled woman in gray, as described in the testimony of Bridget McWaters. My sister, after parting company from you, entered her parlor, unsuspecting of my presence. I was hiding behind the door. I waited till she had partly undressed, then leaped upon her and stabbed her to death. My hatred

of her was immense. No sooner was the deed effected than a movement at the window of the rear room alarmed me. Hardman was looking in, horrified, a witness of my crime. He had tracked me to the house, with the object to save my sister from my insane fury, but was too late. I admitted him through the window. 'Miserable Claudia!' said he; 'I must save you from the consequences of your crime.' He thereupon severed the lock of hair from the dead woman's head, gave me a large sum of money to facilitate my escape, and again stole out of the window, after bidding me fasten it behind him, and then escape by the street door to the carriage which had brought him to the house. I obeyed him to the letter. At first, since then, his object was to protect me from your pursuit. But latterly, since his falling in with the Widow Golightly, he has sought chiefly to hunt me down, not honestly, for the purpose of handing me over to justice, but to destroy me with his own hand, that my son and he may obtain possession of my share of the estate, without the public scandal of my death on the gallows. That is all."

"Not quite. The letter from Arabella to Helen Whitback, making the appointment—the one that you placed in Bridget's hands—how did you obtain that?"

A moment's hesitation, after which the answer came, boldly:

"Helen obtained it at my request. She knew of her name being in the will, and shared in the bloody project with me."

"Infamous woman!" and here Harold, though still unable to speak above a whisper, managed to so far shake off his physical paralysis as to struggle into a sitting posture; "you are not Claudia, whatsoever other being you may be. Your entire story is a tissue of inconsistencies and contradictions. You go not hence until I see your face!"

He made a clutch at her veil, but was evaded, and only seized her left hand instead, while with the other she began to shower him afresh with the vaporous drug that had heretofore wrought his helplessness.

Again the spell was upon him; he grew dizzy, faint and nauseated.

But with a last effort he tore the glove from the hand in his grasp, deeply scoring its forefinger with his thumb-nail.

Then he once more lost the power of motion, and even consciousness.

CHAPTER XXIV.

KEEPING AN APPOINTMENT.

AT eleven o'clock on the following morning, Harold had just recovered consciousness, with Peters's assistance, when Willis put in an appearance.

Willis was looking haggard and ill at ease, as if he had passed a no less disturbed night than his friend.

When Peters had disappeared, they looked at each other inquiringly.

"I have had a mysterious visitor during the wee sma' hours," said Harold.

"Just my own experience," was the reply.

"My visitor was a veiled woman in gray."

"Mine, too."

Harold then told his story, which, it is needless to say, was listened to with absorbing interest.

"What time did your visitor arrive?" asked Willis, when he had finished.

"The clock in the next room was just striking three."

"Ah! then you were the first one favored. My clock struck five after the same creature had honored me nearly an hour with her delightful society."

"Tell me all about it."

"Well, my veiled woman entered to me much as you describe her floating in to you, only with this difference: instead of mystifying me with the mysteriously-obtained Venetian dagger, she held dangling before my eyes the severed tress."

"Did she confess herself to you as Claudia?"

"Exactly; and—barring her accounting for the possession of the tress—my queries evoked just about the same rignmarole of inconsistencies as she tried to palm off on you."

"How about the tress?"

"That is the least contradictory feature of her story, to my way of thinking."

"What did she say?"

"That she snatched it away during our struggle for its possession with Hardman yesterday evening, just after we had both been knocked senseless."

"Ah! well, possibly."

"Yes; I admitted as much."

"What general course did you take?"

"Oh, I kept temporizing in the hope of winning her over to my proposition, and might have succeeded but for one thing."

"What was that?"

"Just what happened in your case. On her accusing my cousin Helen of being her fellow-conspirator in the murder, I lost my temper, just as you did, and let her have my opinion of both her pretended identity with Claudia and her loose-jointed, ridiculous story, hot and heavy."

"And, like me, did you break the spell of helplessness upon you for the time being?"

"Exactly; and, oddly enough, with much the same result."

"How was that?"

"Like you, I waxed indignant, struggled partly out of my powerlessness, and made a grab at her veil."

"Well?"

"In evading my intention, while spraying me with the stupefying vapor afresh, her gloved right hand got in my grasp, instead of the left one, as in your case."

"Ah!"

"Yes; and before she succeeded in breaking away, I scored the forefinger of her right hand till the blood came with my thumb nail, just as you had served the other hand."

"An astonishing coincidence!" said Harold, and, springing up, he began to dress.

They then hurried away to breakfast, in order to be ready for their appointment with the Texan.

The weather on that Sunday afternoon when our two friends stepped into the Battery Park, a few hours later, in accordance with their last appointment with the Texan, chanced to be very similar to that which had spoiled the pageant ceremonies over the inauguration of the great harbor statue a few days previous. It was foggy, cold and drizzly.

"I see nothing of him yet," said Harold, "and I fear our search for him in this crowd will be very like looking for the proverbial needle in a bottle of hay. But wait. Ah! how magnificent!" And his hand was laid arrestingly on his friend's arm.

A gust had lifted the curtain of mist, and there was for the moment a full view of the colossal image.

The two friends were drawing a long breath after the spectacle, when a well-known voice behind them, saying, "I am glad to find you true to your appointment, gentlemen," caused them to turn quickly.

Hardman, the speaker, was at their elbows, with a good-natured smile on his swarthy face, a light cane in one nicely gloved hand, a cigar in the other.

They noticed that he was accompanied by the junior Hardman, and this caused a decided coolness in their response to his greeting.

"Oh, Cowby won't be in the way, I reckon," said Hardman, quickly divining the cause of their displeasure. "I promised to take him for a row out under the pedestal, and if you will only join us, the more the merrier."

CHAPTER XXV.

UNDER THE STATUE OF LIBERTY.

"WELL," said Willis, "if it's a quiet explanation you're looking for, Hardman, we might as well seek it in a rowboat as elsewhere. We're not particular."

"That's the talk," said the Texan.

"Come on, then," and Willis hastened to lead the way to the boat-stairs. "I'm pretty good at selecting a craft."

"Any one will suit me," said the Texan, indifferently, but at the same time secretly exchanging a signal with the boat-keeper. "I'm more at home on horseback than with an oar."

On seeing the new-comers preparing to descend the steps, the keeper signaled to two fellows in a handsome yawl who seemed to be on the lookout for fares.

"Boat for entire party, gents?" he called out, respectfully. "Here's one more left, well-manned, dollar an hour."

Willis nodded, exchanging a look with Harold, as much as to say, "We do the craft-choosing, so that Hardman can play no fresh trick with us here," but no sooner were the party on board the yawl, and moving out over the fog-draped water, than both young men began to suspect that they might have been quietly outwitted after all.

While they were conversing, there was a warning cry from near at hand, and two vessels, one after the other, shot slowly past them in the fog.

One was a large row-boat with a single female figure, probably that of some eccentric sight-seeker of the gentler sex, dimly outlined at the stern.

The other, to which much more attention was paid by Hardman and the two oarsmen—all of whom, in fact, became suddenly as still as death—was the little Harbor Police steamer, the *Patrol*, crowded with both officers and passengers, some of the former seeming to eye our friends curiously before passing out of sight.

"I say," said Hardman, "suppose you fellows be frank with me."

"What do you especially crave frankness about?"

He was quietly getting ready for any emergency that might arise, and so was Harold, for the Texan's manner was not trust-inspiring.

"Oh, you know well enough!" was the sneering rejoinder. "What special secret society do you fellows accuse me of belonging to?"

"You ought to know better than we," Willis drawled out.

"But I'm seeking for the extent of your information."

"Ah! well, then, since you insist, there's the Brotherhood—"

He paused significantly.

Hardman was growing livid.

"If you repeat your insulting rodomontade of yesterday," he interposed hoarsely, "you will do it at your peril, sir!"

"But come, now, you are unreasonable," said Willis, with mock expostulation. "It was not my intention to allude to scalplocks this time."

"Oh!"

"By no manner of means."

"To what then?"

"To another sort of Brotherhood—perhaps a wholly novel one—a creature of my ungoverned imagination."

"And that one?"

"Say, the Brotherhood of the Scored Hands!"

The Texan instinctively tightened the gloves around his wrists.

But before that he must have communicated some signal to the oarsmen, for scarcely were the words out of the Rocket Detective's mouth before they were upon him and his companion with a simultaneous bound that it would have been impossible to provide against.

In a trice both Willis and Harold were helpless on their backs in the stern sheets.

Hardman produced a large roll of stout cord, passing it to the ruffians, who at once, and with very scant ceremony, began securing the young men.

Before this was effected, however, Willis succeeded in tearing off one of Hardman's gloves.

The red mark of a scoring thumb-nail was distinctly visible on the forefinger of each hand!

"I am content," said Willis, then submitting to the inevitable with a sarcastic sigh. "A villain who would masquerade in petticoats is necessarily beneath my contempt."

CHAPTER XXVI.

TRAPPED AND TRUSSED.

HARDMAN'S precocious son had been posted guard over the captives, revolver in hand, while the Texan *pere* was straining his eyes through the fog, his confederates having resumed their places at the oars.

"Where away now, Jeff?" gruffly called out one of the latter.

"Head her back for Bedloe's," was the reply. "We'll have to wait for the darkness there."

A landing was presently effected on a point far back of the pedestal, where there were a number of old buildings, once a part of the military barracks.

The prisoners were at last stowed away in the dark corner of a long, low building, parts of which were stacked up with old cannons, broken gun-carriages and heaps of old-fashioned shot and shell, as if it had at one time been a sort of ordnance lumber-room.

Then, motioning his confederates to retire, Hardman bent over them both, his little black eyes snapping with concentrated animosity.

"I will tell you what I am going to do with you!" he snarled. "I am going to kill you! This very night, your bodies, like the bodies of drowned puppies for which the world has no further use, shall find a resting-place at the bottom of the Narrows, till by the swift ebb-tide borne out into the lower bay!"

"What will you murder us for, Hardman?" asked Harold calmly.

"Because I have come, not only to hate, but to fear you both! There's danger in you—you are in my path—my safety, if not my very life itself, demands your silence. Therefore, I have decided on your 'removal,' which shall be quite as effectual (if somewhat less notorious) as was that of Jessie James at the hands of the Ford brothers."

He concluded with a horrible grin.

"That is as you please," said Willis quietly. "We can die but once, and it will be but another murder on your soul."

"What do you mean by that? What murder would you first lay to my door?"

"The murder of Arabella Hanshaw," said Willis boldly. "Either in your veiled woman's disguise—which you tried to play off upon us last night, with such poor effect—or as an accomplice of the wretched but, we believe, penitent woman whom you so hate and fear, assuredly that murder is at your door."

"Have it so, then."

"Ha! you confess it?"

"I neither confess or deny."

"But why not, and fearlessly, since we are, as you say, doomed?"

"It matters not. You, confessedly, would bring me to the gallows, if in your power."

"Say to trial first," interposed Harold.

"It is all one; and consequently ye must die. And hark ye! He again bent forward, his eyes sparkling malignantly: "Between now and the hour of your death, I shall put the finishing-stroke to the business that shall seal Helen Whitback's fate."

"Oho!"

"Yes; put that in your mental pipes, and smoke them in the interim."

"By-by, Hardman!" said Willis pleasantly.

"Adieu, sweet Texan!" said Harold in the same tone. "There is but one last privilege I

would crave at your remorseless hands before being conducted to my watery grave."

Hardman glared.

"What is it?" he demanded.

"To kiss Master Cowby Hardman before I die. The jewel-like beauty and innocence of that cherubic youth—"

He was interrupted by a furious gesture.

"Nay, my friend in misfortune," said the Rocket Detective gravely, "you do but jest, and this is unseemly. I, too," and he gazed beseechingly at Hardman, "but in serious good-faith, would claim a last, an inestimable privilege."

The Texan was again deluded.

"Name it," said he.

"A final pressure of Jeannette Golightly's hand! The truly Christian character of that angelic creature—"

But he in his turn was interrupted, this time by the Texan rushing out of their presence, as though from the temptation of murdering them both on the spot, and thus incurring a risk of detection that might defeat his plans.

The prisoners were left alone in their strange prison, and, from the fact that Hardman did not return for several hours, they made no doubt that he had gone back to the city—probably after leaving some one on the watch outside—for the express purpose of fulfilling his threat with regard to Helen Whitback's discomfort.

This was somewhat verified a few moments later, when a call in a loud voice on the part of Willis brought Master Cowby and one of the boatmen to the open door of the arsenal, which was at a considerable distance from where they lay bound so helplessly.

"Look here, no more of that!" chirped the little fellow cautiously through the gloom. "Silence is the word, my festive friends, and don't you forget it!"

He waved his huge revolver menacingly as he spoke.

"The cove is karect," growled his companion, with an evil look. "Raise an alarm, if you dare!" And he tapped his brawny breast significantly.

Then they both disappeared in a leisurely manner, doubtless to resume an interrupted patrol in the near vicinity.

CHAPTER XXVII.

BEDLOE'S ISLAND.

HALF an hour later, when the fog and twilight together had gathered so densely that the captives could just make out the outlines of objects throughout their prison, a female figure entered, and glided softly to where they lay, in a half-recumbent position, with their backs propped against the wall, and their limbs almost dead from the long confinement.

It was the veiled woman in gray.

"Will you follow my directions implicitly?" she whispered.

"Yes," was their eager reply.

She severed the bonds of their right hands, placing a small open penknife in the palm of each.

"Listen," continued the veiled woman. "Loosen now, without wholly severing your bonds—just enough to restore circulation. To attempt to do more at present might result in your being instantly shot down by the ruffians on guard. Later, when again on the water with them, you can choose your opportunity to suddenly spring out of your bonds and give them the benefit of a surprise. Help will not be far away. You promise faithfully to obey these instructions?"

"Yes."

She instantly disappeared.

They lost no time in effecting a highly appreciated mitigation of their bonds, through the means provided.

Then an hour slipped away, at the end of which the darkness had grown as dense as in the proverbial dark cell of a State Prison; but at last, when it had grown almost insupportable, it suddenly ceased to be.

A shaft of crystal splendor was pouring into the shed, through a broken window-light over their backs, and nearly every cranny of the place was as bright as if filled with sunlight.

"What did I tell you?" said Willis, triumphantly. "There's a ray of hope for you as is a ray!"

"What does it mean?"

"Can't you guess? They have just lighted up her royal highness, Liberty Enlightening the World."

"Oh, yes!"

"A good thing for us, too. In spite of the fog, our captors will scarcely attempt to carry us over the bay in such a noonday glare as this. Listen to the cheers from the pleasure-boats! Why in such an illumination—Hullo!"

The dense darkness again shut down like the lid of a tomb.

"Rather disappointing, but not incomprehensible," continued the detective, after a pause.

"How do you explain it?"

"Why, haven't you read about these specimen illuminations of the statue?"

"No; I have been too engrossed of late with our detective case to read or think of anything else."

"Well, they are very jerky and ineffectual, and will, moreover, it is said, be relinquished before long, for lack of an appropriation. See; there it comes again!"

Again the strong light poured into the shed, making everything as bright as day; then it disappeared, to be followed by yet another electric flash; and so the brightness and the darkness continued to alternate, with the duration of the latter a little in the excess.

"There'll be enough black patches of it to enable the scoundrels to spirit us away," grumbled Harold.

"Hist! Look to your fastenings. They are coming now."

And at this moment, during one of the bright intervals, Hardman hastily entered the shed, followed by Cowby and the two ruffians.

He appeared haggard and ill-at-ease, and was breathing hard, as if from recent hard running, or what was more likely, from hard rowing.

"Here they are, all safe," he growled, approaching the prisoners. "Quick! into the boat with 'em, and then lie to under the sea-wall for this—electric sunshine to die away."

The prisoners were forthwith bundled off into the yawl, without its being discovered how much they had succeeded in relieving their distress by means of the little penknives.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A DESPERATE GAME.

AT the end of an hour's hard rowing, the boat shot out into the Narrows, and, rounding the point, thus shutting off the last glimpse of the illumination from Bedloe's Island, headed straight for the round black mass of deserted Fort Lafayette.

As they swept down on the out-going tide, the fog once more thickened, though a newly-risen moon strove here and there to pierce it with her straggling rays.

It soon became evident to the captives that the murderous effort to dispose of them must be close at hand.

"Shall we pull right under the old fort?" asked one of the boatmen, in a low voice, that was evidently meant not to be overheard by the prisoners.

"Yes," Hardman was heard to say, with equal guardedness. "The water, I understand, is deep here, with a powerful underflow, and the fort is entirely deserted."

Darker and darker grew the boat's course, seeming even more so by the faint shore and ship-lights twinkling on either side in the distance, and the frowning bulk of the abandoned fort was now close by.

Willis silently warned his friend by a nudge of the elbow, and together, deftly and without an outward sign, they got their penknives to work upon their trammeling bonds.

"This will do," said Hardman, putting up his pistol, as did also Cowby, while the boatmen suddenly shipped their oars. "Cast anchor, Bill!"

But the sharp eyes of the captives had caught sight of something which had escaped the notice of the others.

It was that of a small boat hugging the base of the fort, almost like a part of its own black shadow, and with something like a female figure, the outlines of which could be barely seen, crouching in her stern.

And by this time, moreover, they were in complete darkness.

"Now—you!" exclaimed Hardman, wheeling to lead the rush upon them. "If you haven't said your prayers, it's your own fault, for overboard you're to go this very instant!"

Each of the boatmen held by a line a heavy weight, which had been picked up from between his feet, and the purpose of which was sufficiently apparent.

It was intended to throw the apparently helpless young men overboard with the weights about their necks; in short, just as had been threatened, to drown them then and there in the black sea-water, like kittens or puppies.

But suddenly both Willis and Harold sprung to their feet with a ringing cry, brandishing their delicate but long-bladed penknives, and reaching for their revolvers.

"Bloodthirsty demons!" roared the detective, striking Hardman a staggering blow with his fist before he could recover from his surprise, while Harold upset the junior Texan with a smart kick in the midriff, and then, gaining possession of one of the oars, began to play it over his head for all it was worth; "the tables are turned upon you. If we die, it shall only be in your infernal company."

But the ruffians had already recovered from their surprise, complete as it had been.

At that instant Willis was thrown over backward by the reviving Cowby wriggling pluckily between his legs, and, as he regained his feet he found himself suddenly grappled by the larger of the two hirelings, while Harold was rolling in the bottom of the boat with the other one in his grasp, after knocking the two Hardmans senseless with a simultaneous stroke of the brandished oar.

Willis had only time to notice this feature of his chum's varying fortunes when he went over-

board in his antagonist's grasp, and together the pair disappeared beneath the sullen waves.

At this moment the moon shone forth, fair, full and bright, silencing the sanguinary scene with her soft and peaceful rays.

Harold had just succeeded in quieting his last companion by a stunning blow under the ear, and was only on his feet again, himself breathless and faint, in time to see Willis and Bill, as the fellow had been addressed, go down in their death lock.

Inconceivably distressed, he raised his hands over his head with a great cry of grief, when something hard was pressed against his thigh, and there was the ineffectual snapping of a pistol-lock.

Looking down, he saw the juvenile Texan's young cannon pressed against him, and the irrepressible Cowby behind it, trying his level best to shoot him through the leg.

Tearing the weapon away, and tossing it overboard, together with the elder Hardman's revolver, which was lying by the latter's prostrate form, he again upset the boy, putting his foot upon him, as he might have done upon a noxious worm.

He was then about to give vent to his grief afresh when there a was light touch upon his arm.

Wheeling, he saw the veiled woman in gray, whose boat, containing a single, silent oarsman, had approached from the fort without a sound, and she motioned him commandingly to step from the yawl into her boat.

He did so mechanically, and then, sinking upon a seat, he gave himself up to despair.

"Oh, Willis, Willis, noble heart!" he groaned, bowing his face in his hands, "lost, lost, lost!"

Again the light touch rested on his shoulder, and again he raised his pale, sorrow-stricken face.

Then he gave a great, joyful cry.

The yawl had drifted some yards away, and just rising out of the water was the pale, collected face of a man, whose strong hand had clutched the gunwale of the little boat.

It was the detective.

"Help me out—or rather in, old fellow," said he, calmly. "I feel a trifle short-breathed."

In another minute Harold had him into the boat, and clasped in his arms, all dripping as he was.

"Now God be praised for this!" exclaimed Harold, with a grateful sob. "You are alive, we are together still. But your adversary—where is he?"

"How should I know? My dear Markoe, is this a time for heartless conundrums? But wait; look! he is there!"

He was pointing cut over the moon-lighted water with his hand.

Harold followed it with his eyes.

Yes; there, indeed, was Willis's late antagonist, floating in the moonlight, his dead face upturned, the penknife still adhering in his bosom, whither it had been driven home far down below the surface of the sea, the ruffianly form betraying but a slight movement—

"As shaken on its restless pillow,
Its head heaved with the heaving billow—"

a miserable corpse in the night, a nameless body, drifting slowly out to sea!

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE VAILED WOMAN'S GOOD FAITH.

AT this juncture the discomfited trio in the drifting yawl were seen to recover their senses.

At first they seemed to look around them as if half-stupefied at what had occurred, after which they broke into a volley of curses, in which not one of them was more violent and demonstrative than Master Cowby.

The yawl, with its cursing and defeated occupants, was left to drift as she might out over the Narrows, while the little boat, whose silent oarsman had been pulling slowly all the time since Willis had been dragged on board, in a few moments touched at the landing-place of the ruined fort.

"Step ashore!" then said the veiled woman, in the low, quietly-commanding voice she had adopted when first addressing Harold. "Here we part."

The young men hesitated, and then looked at her irresolutely.

"Do as I bid you," she continued. "In half an hour a row-boat will come to convey you across the strip of water yonder to Fort Hamilton, whence you can take the horses back to the city."

"Is there nothing more to be said?" observed Willis, as he stepped ashore, followed by Harold. "Have you no last word to say to us?"

"Yes," said the veiled woman. "Seek Miss Whitback without a moment's unnecessary delay, if it be not already too late to save her from renewed suffering." This was accompanied by a deep sigh. "Farewell!"

She signed to the oarsman, and the boat disappeared into the deep shadow cast by the neighboring abutments.

"Was there ever such an adventure?" exclaimed Willis. "Thank fortune for this warm wind that is blowing, or I might have caught

my death of cold. My clothes are almost dried already."

Harold was impatiently pacing up and down the little landing-place.

"Heaven protect Helen till we can reach her once more!" said he. "I wonder if the boat will really call for us, as the woman promised."

"It wouldn't be fair to doubt her good-faith, after what she has done," said Willis. "Let us make our way either through or around the fort to the other side, since it is there that the boat from Fort Hamilton can most conveniently make a landing."

This was accordingly done, though not without a great deal of difficulty.

"What time are you?" asked Willis, when they had at last reached the side of the fort facing the Long Island shore. "Deep-sea soundings don't seem to have agreed with my watch. At all events, it has stopped ticking."

Harold consulted his watch.

"Half-past eleven!" he exclaimed. "Heavens! we can't possibly reach New York before two in the morning, even if our promised row-boat should be strictly on time." And he again began pacing to and fro excitedly.

"Which is just what she is, if not even a little ahead of time!" cried Willis, pointing to a boat which, pulled by two lusty rowers, could be seen making rapidly toward them from the opposite shore. "There she comes!" And he ran to a moonlit strip at the foot of the embrasure, and signaled by shouting and waving his arms.

In a few minutes they were on board.

During the brief passage across, the young men tried to question the oarsmen, as to their knowledge of what had taken place and by whom they had been sent, but the fellows chose to be very uncommunicative.

They were landed at Fort Hamilton, and stepped into New York from a Fulton ferry-boat at ten minutes past two.

Arriving at Police Headquarters, a most crushing disappointment was in store for them.

"You cannot see Miss Whitback," said the matron, upon responding unwillingly to their summons.

"Why not, may we ask?"

"Certainly. It is because Miss Whitback is no longer here."

"No longer here!"

"I have said it."

"Where is she?"

"In the Tombs, City Prison!" And the door was uncereemoniously shut in their faces.

In the Tombs! Helen Whitback in the Tombs!

Harold Markoe, for one, staggered back, as if he had been shot.

"Come along!" said Willis, hoarsely, and he dragged him along the cheerless corridor, in one of whose doorways this laconic conversation had taken place. "Come along!"

"But where to?"

"To Sharp's house. Where else? The lawyer shall first explain to us this outrage to his client if he can!"

In another half-hour they were at the desired residence, where both to their satisfaction and surprise, the old lawyer received their untimely visit quite good-naturedly.

"Sit down, sit down!" said he, bustling into the library, into which they had been admitted. "Rather an unseemly hour, to be sure, but I have sort of been expecting you."

He was in a hastily assumed dressing-gown and smoking-cap, and at once proceeded to set out refreshments and cigars as if this reception of visitors at three o'clock in the morning was the commonest of occurrences in the routine of a busy lawyer's social existence.

Willis and Harold abruptly demanded an explanation of Miss Whitback's transfer to the Tombs prison.

"All in good time," said Sharp, genially filling three glasses. "She's simply in the Tombs through her own stubbornness, or caprice, whichever you please, and as she's no worse off there than she was at Headquarters, while nothing can possibly be done for her before court opens this morning, I shall hold back the particulars until you have told me your story."

"But—"

"No buts in mine, if you please. Have a glass of wine. Where have you been? Hawley, you look dilapidated. Tell me all about it."

There was no help for it, so the story of their recent adventures was told forthwith, the old lawyer listening to every word of it with the profoundest interest.

"This is scandalous—positively bloodthirsty!" he exclaimed, in a towering rage. "What! absolute assassination attempted? Does that lunatic, Hardman, imagine that New York City is synonymous with the pop-and-stab manners of his native wilds? Get a warrant out for him to-day! Have him arrested the next time you set eyes on him!"

"Never fear but we shall do all that, sir," said Willis, impatiently. "But don't forget that we are waiting to learn of Miss Whitback's affairs."

"True enough. Listen. She's had an examination, and has been committed simply because she refused to say anything in her exculpation."

"But we understood you were to delay the court-examination, at her special request."

"So did I; but what could I do when Hardman submitted to the district attorney an affidavit directly charging Helen with Miss Hanshaw's murder, of his personal knowledge?"

"What! he did that?" cried Harold.

"He did."

"When?"

"Yesterday afternoon, between four and five."

"Ah!" said Willis; "his threat was not an empty one. At that hour we were in close confinement in the old ordnance shed on Bedloe's Island."

"So!" the lawyer went on. "Well, in spite of it's being a Sunday, the district attorney could do no more than take the matter up. It was only an informal examination that was had before him, you understand."

"Oh!"

"Yes; but it amounted to the same thing as a regular court-examination, so far as the inconvenience to Miss Whitback was concerned."

"Pray, explain."

"Certainly. The district attorney thinks the charge against her as absurd as you fellows or I can do. But what could he do? Miss Whitback positively refused to make any statement as to her whereabouts on that fatal night, and then there was the fellow's affidavit, directly charging her with the crime, that could not legally be treated with the contempt it deserved. Of course, the district attorney could only commit her to prison, and this he did."

"What did Helen say in extenuation of her continued reticence?"

"Almost nothing at all. She merely averred that she was remaining faithful to a dear friend in declining to speak out without that friend's explicit permission."

"And she would not mention the friend's name?"

"Of course not, else all might have been made plain at once. I pleaded with her, but in vain."

"Do you suppose we could obtain an interview with her now?" asked Harold.

"Of course not. The prison regulations are very strict. Besides, where is there need of your seeing her now?"

"We should have done so last evening. It was an appointment she made with Willis and me, but which of course we were unable to keep."

"Call on her this morning at nine. She may have something of interest to say to you. Let us hope so, at least. Moreover, you may find me with her. Now go home and go to bed, both of you. And much as you stand in need of rest and recuperation, be careful that you don't oversleep yourselves. Good-night!"

CHAPTER XXX.

HELEN EXPLAINS.

MUCH to their agreeable surprise, the young man, upon calling on Miss Whitback in the City Prison (which is the real name of New York's celebrated jail, "The Tombs" being nothing more than a nickname), chanced to find her in as cheerful a frame of mind as when first confined at Headquarters.

And she was, moreover, extremely glad to see them.

Mr. Sharp had just left her, accompanied by Mrs. Whitback, so that Helen was still ignorant of the details of the young man's adventures.

She now insisted on hearing them, before making any revelations on her own part.

"I declare, Helen, you are worse than old Sharp himself for having your own way!" said Willis.

But he began the story of adventure forthwith, and was scarcely interrupted in the telling, long as it was, though on more than one occasion his fair listener turned pale and caught her breath over some harrowing detail.

But at the story's conclusion, when the narrator dwelt upon the final obligation which the veiled woman had placed them under to her, she fairly clapped her hands.

"Oh, she is no less heroic than good and true!" she exclaimed. "I knew, I felt that it would prove so!"

"Who is she?" exclaimed Harold. "Or rather, what is she like, for we know that it must be poor Arabella's sister Claudia?"

"Ah! you know that?"

"Well, we think so, at least," interposed Willis. "Who else can the veiled woman be but Claudia?"

"I am not at liberty to say, one way or another."

"Why, we have understood, and fairly lived on the hope," said the Rocket Detective, dolefully, "that you were to tell us everything."

"With certain reservations, as I have already intimated."

"Is this one of them?"

"Yes."

"That you are to tell us your story, without revealing the name of the veiled woman in gray?"

"Yes, for the present, at least."

"Ah, well, it is a good deal like Hamlet's tragedy, with the part of Hamlet left out."

"But pray go on, Helen," put in Markoe. "Better half a loaf than no bread."

"I must start with a rather humiliating confession," said Miss Whitback, coloring. "Were-n't you both rather astonished at discovering that I had any acquaintance with Miss Hanshaw at all?"

"I should say so," said Willis. "It was our first bitter pill. Astonishment is no name for it. We were knocked endwise with amazement."

The young woman laughed, but almost instantly grew graver than before.

"It happened this way," she went on. "I made Miss Hanshaw's personal acquaintance, only a few weeks before the murder."

"How did you make it?" asked Harold.

"By writing her a note, requesting a personal interview."

He looked at her in surprise, and Willis was hardly less puzzled. In spite of Helen Whitback's comparative poverty, her social position had been far superior to that which Arabella Hanshaw had possessed.

"What!" stammered Harold, "you—sought—her?"

"Yes."

"What prompted you to do that?"

Helen was blushing again, quite painfully now, but she bravely abstained from averting her face.

"Jealousy," she replied.

Then she proceeded more calmly:

"You didn't treat me exactly right, Harold, though I may have been somewhat to blame, and all has been forgiven you long ere this. But long before I made up my mind to seek Miss Hanshaw's acquaintance I knew of your flirtation with her, and it caused me many a pang, though, of course, I betrayed nothing when you called."

"I was no less brute than idiot!" said Harold, self-reproachfully. "I thought you growing cold to me, Helen, and therefore sought Arabella's company more and more, after Willis had resigned going there. That was another of my stupid, short-sighted mistakes. Poor Willis—"

"Suppose you drop me out for the present," said Hawley, with a pained look. "I can support the neglect."

"I know all about Willis's mistakes," said Helen. "He misjudged Arabella no less than you did me."

"Arabella herself was blameless," Harold went on, impulsively. "A purer, better heart never throbbed in a handsome woman's breast!"

"Don't I know that now? But let me go on, and in my own way, please. I at last became so jealous with hearing how you were beaming Miss Hanshaw around that I made up my mind to discover whether I had a rival or not—whether she was as earnest as you had the air of being."

"So, after a long agony of hesitating humiliation, I wrote her a note, briefly mentioning that you were betrothed to me, and requesting an interview."

"Her note in reply was so full of kindness and delicacy that somehow I took a fancy to her at the outset."

"In that note she not only granted my request, but said she would be glad to meet me. She appreciated my shrinking from calling on her at her house, even without my hinting of it, and proposed that I should meet her on the following afternoon in Central Park."

"In fact, she made an appointment with me in a secluded little summer-house there, mentioning that she would wear a new suit of gray, including a veil of the same color."

"It was this circumstance that gave rise to the confusion in that now notorious costume."

"In other words, Arabella Hanshaw herself was the first veiled woman in gray."

"Well, the appointment was kept, and we almost instantly became fast friends."

"Young women form these sudden intimacies, I think, with much more readiness than do men, and in a way that men are too practical and obtuse to comprehend."

"In addition to her beauty, which was so considerable, I found Miss Hanshaw charmingly frank and cordial. It was not long before I had a glimpse into the real state of her heart, and it was an attractive revelation of her sunny but profoundly thoughtful nature; for her airiness was but a mask—and a very pretty one it was—for emotional depth and powerful attachments."

"She loved you, Willis Hawley, and it was your seeming neglect that had driven her to seeking relief in the gay society of your friend, for whom, however, she only cared as an agreeable and light-hearted companion. That was the state of the case."

"But why couldn't she have given me a hint of it?" interposed Harold, a little peevishly. "Look how much that would have saved Willis and herself."

"Women are so apt to tell men such things, where their own hearts are interested, are they not?" said Helen, ironically. "No man ever yet understood a woman's heart, nor ever will. You are all alike."

And, with this little easement of her sarcasm, Miss Whitback went on with her story.

CHAPTER XXXI.

HELEN'S STORY CONTINUED.

"WELL, after some conversation and a good many interchanges of confidences, it was agreed

between us that we should continue our meetings in the Park, and that Arabella should keep up her seeming flirtation with you, Harold (for, of course, I now understood that it was nothing more than apparent on either of your parts), until such time as we should decide between us that both Willis and you were worthy of being brought back to your first allegiance.

"This determination was more generous on Arabella's part than mine; for while I, though suspecting the true state of the case, could not honestly give her an assurance of Willis's devotion to her, she could do the like kindness for me, even with the knowledge that the result would be her own deprivation, in the final loss of Harold as an agreeable gallant and companion.

"At this first interview, I had occasion to admire Miss Hanshaw's walking suit, which became her vastly. Then, or shortly after, a man chancing to pass the door of our retreat, and to eye us a little more inquisitively than was pleasant, Miss Hanshaw, who had suddenly grown unaccountably disturbed, proposed that I get me a suit exactly like hers, so that we might thereafter continue our rustic appointments without the one being distinguished from the other—for you know our figures were much alike—by any stranger who might chance to watch us.

"She even offered to send me to her dress-maker, and, after playfully vaunting her worldly wealth, begged that I would permit her to defray the expense—in other words, to make me a present of the proposed costume.

"I only consented to this after certain subsequent developments.

"Her disturbed manner at receiving the passing stranger's scrutiny had not escaped me. 'But why,' I asked, 'should we particularly wish not to be distinguished from one another?'

"I will tell you a secret," said she, after a pause. 'I suspect that man who just looked at me so inquisitively, in spite of my veil.'

"You suspect him?" I repeated.

"Yes, of being Claudia's husband—a bad, a dangerous man."

"And who is Claudia?"

"Then Miss Hanshaw gave me her family history in full, as you gentlemen must know it by this time, and how her twin sister Claudia was even then living in secret with her, having only come under her protection a few days previously, after escaping from her husband's murderous brutality in Texas."

Both Willis and Harold stared.

"What!" exclaimed the former. "Arabella was then befriending and protecting Claudia?"

"Yes; ah, I don't wonder at your surprise, considering the delusions which that villain Hardman succeeded in fostering in you!"

"And this explains Bridget McWaters's testimony as to her mistress's oddity in forbidding entrance into her bedroom?"

"Exactly. She was keeping her unfortunate sister concealed there, until such time as she could send her off to Europe, or elsewhere, beyond her demoniac husband's pursuit."

"Had his treatment of her been so unbearable?"

"Infamous!"

"And had Claudia never been insane at all, or inspired with any hatred of her sister?"

"Never any more than I, and the sisters fairly adored one another. But let me go on.

"Hardman, it seems, had not only systematically maltreated his poor wife from the period, shortly after their marriage, when it had become plain that her uncle had disowned her, but this was not all. He kept a low concert and drinking-hall in one of the frontier towns, where he caused her to sing and play the piano for the delectation of his low and ruffianly patrons, but, after the uncle's death, he compelled her to apply incessantly to Arabella for pecuniary aid.

"This was accorded generously enough until Arabella got secret word from Claudia that the sums of money thus sent were systematically appropriated by the miserable Hardman, who wasted them in gambling and riotous excesses. After this the supplies were stopped, and Claudia's situation became more painful than before, as a matter of course.

"But even this was not the sum of poor Claudia's sorrows. She had never had a child of her own, but a few years ago her villainous husband compelled her to receive a precociously vicious little boy, his own son by a former wife, who was langed in her native Sonora for poisoning her father and mother soon after the boy's birth.

"This is the boy at present with Hardman, whom he calls Cowby. According to what I was told by Miss Hanshaw, he is a true son of his unworthy sire, being wicked, cruel and depraved to a degree that cultivated people can hardly conceive of. Well, the boy contributed not a little to the desperateness that finally drove Claudia, a terror-stricken fugitive, from her Texas home.

"This information has since been verified by Mr. Sharp, through carefully instituted inquiries at the various localities where the Hardmans resided from time to time throughout the Southwest; for the man was never permitted to

remain a great while in one place before being compelled by the authorities or outraged public opinion to change his field of operations.

"Indeed, he is supposed to have been the chief of a band of infamous robbers, murderers and conspirators, known as the Order or Brotherhood of the Scalp-Lock, one of whose sworn obligations was to invariably secure a trophy from a victim of their murderous cupidity or resentment in the shape of a lock of hair, severed from close to the scalp with a series of peculiar cuts.

"This is Mr. Sharp's chief anxiety, to obtain the tress that was missing from the unfortunate victim of the Belgrade tragedy.

"If displaying this peculiarity in the manner of the severance, as Mr. Sharp thinks it will, it would not only serve to convict Hardman of that crime, but might also implicate the entire Brotherhood, many of whose members are known, and which he is desirous to wipe out of existence, in the interests of society at large."

"All right," interposed Willis at this juncture. "We shall yet obtain possession of that tress of hair, or perish in the attempt."

"But this is a long digression I have been led into making apart from the simpler thread of my story," Helen continued. "After Miss Hanshaw had acquainted me with her secret, I consented to her proposition in respect to the gray veil and walking-suit.

"Just as we were separating, with many expressions of good will, and after arranging for another quiet interview, though not exactly in the same spot, Miss Hanshaw said: 'When we next meet, you will resemble me so closely that few would be able to tell us apart, as I observe that our heights and figures are very much alike. By the way, then there will be three of us—three of a kind, as the sporting men would say.' And then she laughed.

"What do you mean by that?" I asked. "How shall you make three women in gray out of two?"

"You will be the third," said she, "for the second is already made. The second is Claudia herself."

"And then she went on to tell me how she had adopted this plan so as to enable Claudia to take the air without running so much risk of detection on the part of her husband, should he have come to the city in pursuit of her.

"But," I said to Miss Hanshaw, "since this man is so evil and resentful, are you not apprehensive that he might by this very confusion mistake you for her—especially since you say that she is almost your exact image in feature no less than form—and thus work you some murderous injury?"

"Miss Hanshaw laughed as she lifted her veil to kiss me adieu. 'I don't think I was ever afraid of anybody, man or woman, in my life,' said she. 'Still less would I be likely, under any circumstances, to have any fear of a dastardly, infamous wretch like Jeff. Hardman, who has just been brave and manful enough to systematically misuse my poor sister who, though once so care-free and cheerful, has at last come to be afraid of her own shadow.'

"We then separated, not without some misgivings on my part, as I had never engaged in anything like such an arrangement before. Still it was romantic enough to have a sort of fascination in it besides, and I made a point to confide the whole affair to my mother as soon as I reached home.

"She hardly liked the sort of agreement into which I had entered, but neither could she see any special danger in it, so that she did not gainsay me.

"When I next met Miss Hanshaw in Central Park, I was also in my gray suit, which I thought became me no less than hers did her, and, without seeing our faces, you would not have been able to say which was which."

"It is strange," said Harold, "for much as I saw of Arabella at that period, I do not remember to have once seen her in gray, or wearing a veil."

"It is not likely that you would. Arabella only assumed the incognita costume when coming to meet me, or going out with Claudia, though the latter, by the way, would but seldom venture abroad.

"Well, from that time forth Arabella and I met very often in this way. Our appointments were always in one or another secluded nook in Central Park, and our converse was for the most part confined to two subjects—both masculine ones, I need hardly say.

"But our attachment for each other also strengthened apace, as you may well believe.

"But one day Miss Hanshaw said to me: 'I have two items of news for you, my dear.' I looked interested. 'The first is,' she went on, 'that, in case of my dying first, you would find yourself fairly well-to-do. I have made my will, and you are named in it.' I hardly knew what to say to this. But then it seemed to me rather a jest at the time, as she was in superb health, as you will remember, and the possibility of my outliving her, though myself in robust condition, was extremely remote.

"So I merely thanked her laughingly. 'The other item,' said Miss Hanshaw, 'is this. At our next meeting, I shall, if you have no objec-

tion, bring my sister with me to share it, so that she can sometimes come to see you alone, and thus get over her haunting dread of being out of doors, for fear of meeting her husband.'

"I said that I could have no objection whatever—in fact, would be glad to form her sister's acquaintance. But would not the fact of there being three veiled women in gray on the carpet at one time—rather complicate the matter, with some risk of incurring the danger it was so desirable to avoid—namely, detection, or at least suspicion, on the part of the wicked pursuer, should he chance to have got track of our meetings.

"No; Miss Hanshaw thought that no such risk would be incurred. So it was agreed between us, and at our next meeting Claudia Hardman was one of us.

"Though of a much more pensive disposition, and I think of a generally weaker character, than Miss Hanshaw, she was a very gentle, sweet and timid woman, and I soon came to like her greatly, though not with the same devotedness that I had come to admire and love Arabella.

CHAPTER XXXII.

HELEN'S STORY CONCLUDED.

"THE physical likeness between the sisters was closer than I had ever seen or heard of, even in the case of twins. Indeed, until one had become acquainted with their varying temperaments and facial expressions, it would have been almost impossible to distinguish one from the other.

"As we often sat, when in a particularly secluded place, with our veils raised, for the trio of us met thereafter quite frequently, I thus had ample opportunities for studying and analyzing their differences, which would not at all have been noticeable at a first acquaintance.

"But the serenity of these pleasant meetings was not to remain forever unclouded.

"One afternoon, directly after separating from the sisters, they having just gone off in one direction and I about to start in the other, I detected, to my astonishment, yet another veiled woman in gray—or so it seemed—gliding stealthily away from the rear of a little vine-bowered summer-house in which we had been chatting.

"Was there yet a fourth veiled woman in gray?" I asked myself. "And had she been eaves-dropping?" Though somewhat alarmed at the thought, I lost no time in darting after and following the person. At first the figure seemed exactly like either of the sisters, or like myself, in personal appearance, for that matter.

"But I had not kept up my secret pursuit for many minutes before I became satisfied, by certain forgetfulness, so to speak, in the figure, gait and carriage, that it was a man in disguise. Of course, you will understand that it was the villain Hardman, who, by reason of his low stature and spare build, had thus been enabled to ape successfully the triple character we three women were carrying out, though I was too much in a whirl to think this out clearly at the time.

"I had scarcely made this general discovery before the person became aware of my pursuit, and, abruptly turning, confronted me.

"Then I was really frightened, and the sham woman in gray, doubtless conjecturing correctly that I was neither the wife nor sister-in-law whom he was so intent on avenging himself upon, took advantage of my perturbation to disappear down a neighboring path, and I saw him no more. But of course, he must have gone off without knowing for certain whether I had suspected the deception or not.

"Left alone, I hurried to a more frequented locality, where I sat down, and gave myself up to many painful reflections. I doubted not that the man in disguise was Hardman. He had, doubtless, frequently overheard our supposed secret conversations, which would readily have enabled him to study and subsequently obtain an exact copy of our costume from one or another of the various man-dressmakers, after which he could the more easily have obtained access to the vicinity of our private talks, without exciting suspicion on the part of a policeman or any other outsider.

"What was to be done? I knew how bitterly the detestable man hated his fugitive wife, and perhaps his sister-in-law no less so.

"Indeed, I felt no doubt that prudence had alone prevented him from murdering one or both of them before this, in broad daylight. Was he not, then, most likely now studying his opportunity for an undetectable crime?

"I would at once have hurried after the ladies, and given them warning at their residence of the terrible danger that menaced them, but was deterred from doing so by two considerations.

"In the first place, there was a bare chance of Hardman having been foiled as yet in discovering that they were living together in Miss Hanshaw's apartments—for you know that even Bridget was ignorant of the fact, so discreetly had the secret been managed—and I feared that by going thither so soon after seeing him would result in my being followed, and the fact thus discovered.

"In the next place, Miss Hanshaw had told

me that you, Harold, would be likely to call there that same afternoon, and of course it was our object to keep our acquaintance a secret from both you and Cousin Willis until such time as we should decide that you might deserve to share it."

"And when was that to be?" asked Harold, as she came to a pause, while Willis also looked up inquiringly. "When were we to be decided so deservingly?"

"When we should consider you sufficiently good boys," was the laughing reply.

"And by what was our necessary goodness to be determined?"

Miss Whitback blushed very rosily and prettily.

"By your resuming the attentions you owed to me," said she, casting down her eyes, "and by Willis growing sensible enough to resume his allegiance to Arabella—of course, of your own accord and without my prompting, in both cases."

Harold colored, while Willis placed his hand to his forehead.

"Ah, had I but known!" murmured the former, and he ventured to take one of Helen's hands. "But am I forgiven at last?"

She withdrew her hand, but answered gently, "I have told you yes already. But, considering my present compromising position here in prison, it may ere long be your turn to forgive, if not to stoop—to—to—"

With a passionate exclamation, he interrupted her, and, as their eyes met, they knew that there would, come what might, nevermore be a question of forgiveness or stooping on either side.

But the unfortunate Willis was in no mood to sympathize with these implied transports.

"Oh!" he exclaimed, sorrowfully; "it is rather I should cry out, 'Had I but known! had I but known!' Your future may be sufficiently secure, but what is left for me save haunting misery and remorse?"

His cousin looked at him strangely.

"Have courage, Willis," said she. "It is never too late to hope."

"What, not in my case—with the woman I so loved, so adored, and alas! so fatally misunderstood—with Arabella murdered, and in her grave?"

Helen turned away her head.

"The inevitable is still the inevitable," said she, in a low voice. "But we should never forget the poet's lines:

"Oh, never should human faith despair
Of the presence of God on high!
Oh, never should human hope grow dim
While the stars are in the sky!"

"It is the one thing that is left us, Cousin Willis, in our worldly trials and distresses."

And then, having rather mystified than consoled him, she went on with her story.

"In my distress of mind as to what should be done over the discovery I had made, I at last hurried home and told my good mother all about it. She was rather anxious at the complicated turn the affair was taking, but unhesitatingly advised me to write to Miss Hanshaw at once, briefly stating the discovery I had made."

"This I accordingly did, it being still quite early in the afternoon, and sent my letter by a district messenger, with instructions to wait for an answer. The answer—a strange one—came in a short time. It was the letter of Miss Hanshaw's bidding me call on her the succeeding night without fail, that was produced by Bridget McWaters at the coroner's investigation."

"I had about decided to keep the appointment made in the letter, when another note, of course by a different messenger, came from her, rescinding the appointment, bidding me have no fears on either her own or Claudia's account, and saying that she had been persuaded by you, Harold, to go upon an excursion up the Hudson, from which she would not be likely to get back until a late hour."

"This last note of hers I carried to my room with me, and shortly afterward destroyed it by mistake, in lighting mamma's gas-stove, for the purpose of making her a warm preparation that she had been ordered to take."

"The first note, the strange one making the appointment in answer to my warning, I had carelessly left open in the card-basket on our little drawing-room center-table."

"Late in the afternoon Mary, our maid, brought me word that she had just shown a lady into the parlor who was desirous of speaking with me."

"I was surprised, not anticipating a visitor at that hour."

"What sort of a lady?" I inquired of her.

"I can't say, ma'am," was the reply, "because she keeps her veil—a beautiful, silvery veil—over her face; but she is very nicely dressed in a gray suit, for all the world exactly like the one I have lately seen once or twice on yourself."

"By this time I was all eagerness, as you may imagine. I inquired if the lady had given any name. Yes; Mrs. Claudia Hardman."

"Dismissing Mary to the kitchen—my mother was absent at the time—I hurried toward the parlor, not doubting that something else of

more importance than a steamboat excursion had happened, and that Claudia was there as a fresh messenger on Miss Hanshaw's behalf."

"But as I entered the parlor from the rooms behind, the visitor was surreptitiously stealing out of it by the private hall-way."

"Instantly and intuitively I detected something in the person's looks or carriage that recalled the counterfeit of a few hours before."

"More indignant than alarmed, I sprang in pursuit, with an exclamation. As I did so, the visitor turned upon me, and the concealing veil was thrown back. I stood as if riveted to the floor, incapable of movement or speech. The swarthy, sinister face revealed to me was that of the man whom Miss Hanshaw and I had noticed passing the door of the little summer-house on the occasion of our first interview."

"Of course it was, moreover, Jefferson Hardman's, as I subsequently discovered both at the reading of the will and at the funeral, and in Mr. Sharp's office on the following day. Not only was his terrifying face revealed to me now, but in his right hand, which had just been withdrawn from the front folds of his disguise, was clasped a long, bright-bladed poniard with a jeweled hilt, the glitter of which seemed to fascinate me as much as his stern, cruel gaze seemed to repel and terrify me."

"In spite of my alarm, which was by this time excessive, I somehow instantly recognized the weapon as yours, Harold—you having once exhibited it to mother and me, together with a little chestful of curios, on an occasion of our visiting you at your apartments, when you were laid up with a sprained ankle—and I could not help wondering how it had come into this man's possession. You remember that you had not apprised any of us of your having been robbed, as subsequently came out at the inquest."

"Well, the scoundrel looked at me steadily for an instant, without speaking, as if quietly enjoying my terror. Then he said, in a low, hissing voice: 'Beware! Interfere further with me, or between me and my affairs, and it will cost you your life!'"

"He then quietly disappeared, and it goes without saying that I did not follow him. I was well-nigh too frightened to go back into the parlor, and sink into a seat beside the center-table, but succeeded in doing so. Then I missed Miss Hanshaw's first note to me from the card-basket where I had left it, though the envelope was still there; and I did not doubt that it had vanished in the rascal's company, though his object in taking it I could not then imagine. Afterward, of course, I found out."

"I did not even tell my mother of what had happened when she returned home. It was the first time I had ever withheld a confidence from her, but I feared the effect of the incident upon her nerves."

"Knowing that Miss Hanshaw must have gone on the excursion, I resolved to visit her early on the following morning and acquaint her with everything."

"The morning came, but the danger was past averting. The murder of the Belgrade was already an accomplished horror!"

They had followed her with breathless attention.

"But your story is scarcely finished," exclaimed Willis. "This is not all."

"It is all that I am at liberty to tell you at present," said Miss Whitback, calmly.

CHAPTER XXXIII. FRESH COMPLICATIONS.

"ALL!" repeated Harold. "But if you had only told at the outset as much as you have told us, Hardman would be in jail in your place—ay, and with the shadow of the gallows hovering over him, in the bargain, and this trouble could never have come upon you."

"True."

"What withheld you from speaking, then?"

"A promise."

"A promise?"

"Yes."

"What promise?"

The same that now withholds me from saying more than I have said to you and Cousin Willis."

"But a promise to whom?"

"To a woman."

"What woman?"

"That remains my secret."

"And you will not divulge her name?"

"You see that I do not—at present."

Harold threw up his hands, after his fashion in expressing bewilderment or vexation, or both.

"Helen, you are in—comprehensible!" he exclaimed. "I had well-nigh said incorrigible!"

"Either will answer—so long as you still love me," said she, demurely.

He was more than ready to pardon her tantalizing reticence, in view of the arch little look with which she accompanied her words.

"Now, look here," struck in Willis, in his old business-like way. "As long as Cousin Helen has vouchsafed to tell so much—which is more than sufficient to set her at liberty and jug Hardman, I'll be bound—we can assuredly afford to let her keep the rest of her secret to herself."

"Especially," said Helen, smiling, "when she will undoubtedly do so, whether you let her or not."

"Yes, indeed," said Harold. "Trust us for never trying to worm or wheedle a secret out of you against your inclination again. One experience is enough in that line. Eh, Willis?"

Willis nodded and laughed, as did Helen also.

"But, of course, you have already told Mr. Sharp this much of your story?" said Willis.

"Oh, yes, and more too, long ago."

This was not very flattering to the self-love of her present company, but the young men managed to bear up.

"And you will also tell it at your examination?" Willis continued.

"Certainly."

"When is the examination to take place?"

"Late this afternoon."

"What?"

"Yes, cousin."

"You must have come to positively dote on prison-life."

"But I rather detest it, just the same."

"Was not your examination fixed for some hour this afternoon?"

"Yes."

"Why has it been changed?"

"On consultation with Mr. Sharp, I deemed it advisable to have it so delayed, if practicable."

"But why, unless you are positively in love with prison existence?"

"You will probably discover if you are present at the examination, as I trust you will be."

And she named the court, the judge, and the hour.

"Of course, we'll be there," said Harold.

"But—"

"I shall really have to tell you gentlemen to run along," she interrupted, with a smile. "My mother ought to be back here by this time, and she will prefer to see me alone. Don't forget the examination, please."

"Well, I'm—clean upset!" was Harold's comment, as soon as they were again in the outer air. "She's worse than Sharp himself."

"A remarkable woman!" said Willis. "Helen Whitback would have made an excellent detective."

"Undoubtedly," grumbled the other, if keeping her own counsel were one of the main detective requisites. "But where are you leading?"

"To Sharp's office, first."

"And where then?"

"To get once more on the track of the Hardmans."

"Good! But do you fancy they will dare to linger in or about the city after their murderous attempt of last night?"

"I only hope so; that's all."

"But how shall you find out?"

"Do you forget Heintzelman, the police detective, who was with Hardman at Mrs. Golightly's?"

"Ah, I begin to see your drift. And if Heintzelman cannot guide us to the villain's whereabouts, perhaps Mrs. Golightly can be worked to better advantage."

"Perhaps so, though I would sooner simulate courtesy with a rattlesnake than with the blooming widow."

"But talk of the—"

And here Willis, who had just turned up the street steps leading to Sharp's offices smiling, raised his hat, not to the devil, whose proverbial name he had been about to pronounce, but to that ubiquitous personage's attractive representative in the person of the fair widow herself, who was just preparing to engineer her skirts in the descent to the sidewalk.

Had she also been honoring Lawyer Sharp with a morning call?

At all events, Harold lifted his hat also, and was equally urbane.

Mrs. Golightly looked at them a little venomously at first, but she was not the sort of woman to long resist the blandishment of two fashionable and more than average looking young gentlemen, evidently bent on doing the agreeable to their utmost.

"Oh, dear me, how polite we are suddenly grown!" said she.

"It has been your own fault, my dear Jeannette," said Harold, with his most irresistible air, "if we have ever been stung or goaded by your indifference into being other than your slaves."

"Truly, he speaks but well, Jeannette," said Willis, beamingly. "Did you know that I am something of a troubadour?"

"When lovely woman, dazzler of the sexes,
Her best admirers unto madness vexes,
What can she blame but her own grace and beauty
If lost at times is high chivalric duty
In raging passions, born of discontent,
While still to her the willing knee is bent?"

"A poor sample of my improvising art, fair dame; but really you are looking lovely today."

Much as she had come to detest them both, the widow was too shallow and vain not to accept all the flattery that was to be had, and she had moreover by this time come to the conclusion that Hardman would hardly do to stand by, greatly as she might desire a second husband,

though she had no idea of betraying her small Samson into the hands of the Philistines as yet.

"Very pretty, no doubt," said she, simpering. "But I suppose you are just dying to know if I have been calling on Mr. Lawyer Sharp."

"Sharp, Sharp!" repeated Willis, abstractedly. "Oh, by the way, his office is at this number."

"Just as if you did not know it!"

"But, my dear lady, I do know it, as a matter of course, now that I am here by the purest coincidence."

"You'll discover nothing of my motives, past, present or future!" And the widow tapped her prettily booted foot on the top step determinedly. "You won't be admitted, I'll tell you that before you go up!" she continued angrily. "He wouldn't even see me, because of some lady client he's closeted with, and—"

She paused, reddening and biting her lip.

"Good-morning, madam!" said Willis, smiling a little triumphantly as he again lifted his hat with elaborate—perhaps a little too elaborate—ceremony. "*Bon voyage* to your secretary!"

Harold followed suit, and the widow, reddening with vexation at having given herself away at last, flounced down the steps with a parting look of concentrated venom.

"Perhaps she is in communication with Hardman," whispered Harold. "Shall we follow her?"

"The deuce, no! Sharp has attended to that. Look!"

He pointed to a slim young man, whom they both recognized as one of Sharp's clerks, who was already quietly on the track of Mrs. Golightly, as she threaded the crowded Broadway sidewalk in the up-town direction.

The elevator compartment newly descended, was just disgorging a number of passengers, and a group of others were waiting to step on board, as the young men approached it.

Among those stepping out was Lawyer Sharp himself, with a lady—a veiled lady in gray—at his side, with whom he was earnestly exchanging some words.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

HO FOR OAK POINT!

"Come!" whispered Willis. And they followed the pair to the street, intending to make an opportunity of addressing the lawyer, and perhaps forcing him to introduce his companion by name.

But, upon regaining a view of the street, both Sharp and his companion were nowhere to be seen.

It was terribly provoking.

At last, however, they thought they perceived the woman in question, who was walking rapidly up the street, and they at once started in pursuit.

When close to the veiled woman, and Harold was about to accost her, she suddenly confronted them, as though aware of being followed from the very first.

"Please don't attempt to address me now!" said she, pleadingly. "Mr. Sharp would not wish it. Here is some information we had prepared against chancing to meet you."

She thrust a note into Harold's hand, and then, having signaled an up-going horse-car, swiftly crossed the intervening space and stepped on board of it.

"Come along!" whispered Willis, moving on. "I want to make no mistake about the right woman this time, I tell you! Come along, and read the note out aloud as you do so."

The reading of the communication was gradually accomplished, to the following effect:

"Mr. Sharp will rejoin me within an hour at Harlem Bridge, whence we shall proceed to Oak Point. Follow us thither. Hardman is hiding at the sporting hotel there, or in its immediate vicinity. It is important, nay, vital, that he shall be in custody in time to be brought in court at Miss Whitback's examination to-day. A police detective will accompany us. I write this at Mr. Sharp's suggestion, in his consultation room."

Willis, after listening to the reading, started in a break-neck run for the horse-car which the woman had boarded, and which was now more than a block away.

But he presently came back, looking nervous and annoyed.

"Slipped us again!" he said, crossly. "She must have quitted the car soon after stepping into it."

"What of that? You couldn't have expected her to try to reach Harlem Bridge by that means. Come along to the Elevated."

"Let me see that note," said Willis, when they had boarded an Elevated train.

Harold gave him the note, but Willis was interrupted just then by an old friend, who greeted both him and his companion very cordially, and entered into a conversation with them, which lasted almost to the end of the route.

The consequence was that Willis thrust the communication in his pocket, and temporarily forgot all about it.

But they arrived at the Oak Point landing, 129th street, just too late for the little excursion steamer, which had started out five minutes previously.

"It's too infernally bad!" exclaimed Harold, greatly vexed. "However, it can't be over a few miles by water to the point, and I suppose we can get a boatman to row us there."

"It's the better part of ten miles, for I remember to have attended a sculling match there last spring," said Willis, still lukewarmly.

"But you really didn't expect that we'd be able to reach the steamer as soon as our informant, did you?"

"Why not?"

"Why, indeed! If she had intended that we should accompany her on the steamer, why would she have taken the trouble to 'shake' us on the street?"

"True; you're one ahead of me there."

But the Oak Point ticket agent, on being interviewed, was quite certain that he had seen a veiled lady in gray on board the steamer at the last minute, accompanied, or not far apart from, a brisk-moving elderly gentleman, with bristling gray hair and side-whiskers, who might well enough have been Lawyer Sharp from the general description, so that Willis became almost as hopeful as Harold as they hurried to the boat-house directly under the southeastern abutment of the bridge, where they experienced neither difficulty nor delay in engaging the services of a couple of stout oarsmen, who agreed to land them at Oak Point inside of an hour and a half, for they would have the outgoing tide in their favor.

In a few minutes they were afloat.

Presently, when making the turn in the neighborhood of Hunt's Point, they drew near to a small tug, loaded with passengers, that had met with some accident to her screw, and was funing and churning around in a limited space, without making much headway, apparently to the unmitigated disgust of those on board.

One of the oarsmen burst into a hearty laugh.

"Left again!" he exclaimed. "Even we will be at Oak Point before the tug yonder."

"Who are those on board?" inquired Willis.

"A gang of left-behinds same as you gentlemen," was the response. "Only instead of coming to our boss for a row-boat, as you were content to do, they chipped in, though like enough strangers for the most part to each other, and hired the *jumper*, as we call the little touch-and-go tug over there, that never drew off a mile without something happening to her. It's ten to one that they won't mend her bellows inside of an hour."

"Is there then some sporting event on the go to-day?"

"Yes, sir; boxing match between Jack Cropsey and the Bridgeport Pet."

Willis now bethought himself of the veiled woman's note, which he had thrust into his pocket, and he proceeded to examine it forthwith.

Almost at the first glance, he decided that the handwriting was not identical with that of the sympathetic ink communications (which were not on hand for the necessary comparison, however), although there was undoubtedly a strong resemblance.

He at once communicated his discovery to Harold.

"They look near enough alike for me," said the latter, who was looking off intently at the unfortunate tug.

"It isn't enough for me, though," said Willis, in a low voice. "I fear another trap. I shouldn't be surprised if Hardman were not within miles and miles of Oak Point."

"You wouldn't, eh?" exclaimed Harold, suddenly pointing to the tug. "Well, I should. Where the she-wolf is about, the he-one is not far away. Look there!"

Willis did so, and saw, among the crowd on the tug, Mrs. Golightly.

CHAPTER XXXV.

IN THE LION'S DEN.

HAROLD put his head a little closer to his friend's.

"Look again," said he, in a low voice of quiet satisfaction. "Don't you remark any other object or objects of interest there among the impatient crowd, besides our tricky little widow?"

"Yes," said Willis, after a pause. "A slim young fellow and a big man, perhaps intent on watching the widow's movements, without letting her suspect it."

"Exactly! And—look hard!—don't you recognize them, as well?"

A moment more, and Willis's face also brightened, while he softly slapped his thigh.

"Ha!" he muttered; "Sharp's young clerk, and Heintzelman, the police detective, in disguise, if I mistake not."

"Precisely!" said Harold, rubbing his hands. "Aha! Lawyer Sharp wasn't born yesterday any more than we were. Don't you twig the situation?"

"I think so."

"They are doubtless shadowing the widow at Sharp's especial instance, while he and our woman in gray are gone on ahead, with us, duly notified, on the same track."

"It looks uncommonly like it."

Half an hour later they landed at Oak Point,

a handsome, though scarcely fashionably suburban resort, that had but recently been first opened to the public by Pilkington, a professional oarsman of reputation, together with a popular side-partner.

When they had wandered about the grounds for some time without catching a sign of any one of those they were hoping to see, they presently found themselves at the extreme limit of the grounds, at the entrance into a narrow path that seemed to thread a gloomy and ill-cared-for strip of woodland extending indefinitely along the edge of the tide-water toward the east.

They were about turning back when Harold arrested his companion's attention with a sudden exclamation.

"At last!" he murmured, pointing eagerly into the wood. "Look! she is there."

Yes; sure enough, there, some ways down the lonely path, stood the veiled woman in gray, her face toward them.

She stood like a statue, making not the slightest movement, but something in her air suggested that she was waiting for them.

This had such an appearance of good faith being kept with them that the young men, without a word, unhesitatingly went toward her.

"You are prompt," said the veiled person, in a hoarse but scarcely audible whisper, "and that is so far well."

"Yes," said Harold, a little dramatically, "you perceive that we have trusted you completely."

"You are to follow me," said the veiled person.

"Assuredly, madam," said Willis, with increased suavity. "But whither?"

"To Hardman's hiding-place, where he cowers away, fearing arrest, and awaiting a visit from Jeannette Golightly, who has grown enamored of him."

"Where may that be?"

"Deep in this forest; you will see for yourselves."

"You are clever, to have tracked him to his lair so soon, madam."

"True; vengeance and fear are often unerring instincts."

"Still, how did you accomplish it? We are naturally curious."

"Remain so, and where you are, if you choose," and the veiled figure was turning away with an air of supreme indifference. "You ask too many questions of one who has proved your friend."

Harold, who had been listening impatiently, made a movement to interfere, but Willis restrained him by a deprecating sign.

"One moment, madam!" continued the latter.

"Where is Mr. Sharp?"

"See!" she turned, and pointed far down the gloomy path.

Here, indeed, half-crouching and looking away from them, in an attitude of profound watchfulness, was the figure of a man which both young men at once thought they recognized as Lawyer Sharp.

"Lead on!" cried Willis; and they followed unhesitatingly as she led the way swiftly down the path.

But the man ahead had also begun to move on at the same time.

"He is watching the formation of the cordon around Hardman's retreat," whispered the veiled guide, breathing hard. "See; do you not mark those rough-looking men posted among the trees far in advance of him?"

"Yes, we see them," said Willis, and neither he nor Harold made any further pause.

"Lawyer Sharp takes no chances," continued the veiled guide, still leading on. "Those men are the country constables he has engaged by telegraph for this special capture. On, on; but be prudent. Do you also mark the low, solid-looking little building, away off down yonder on the bank of the inlet that suddenly opens out there?"

"Yes."

"Well, that is Hardman's retreat. On, on, my friends!"

The young men's blood was now thoroughly aroused.

Suddenly, just as they had got within the cordon of watchful men, their guide bounded forward, and joined the lawyer-resembling man.

Then the two suddenly wheeled, with a triumphant shout, the veil being at last torn aside from the guide's face, revealing the features of Hardman himself fairly demoniacal with fiendish exultation.

Far from being Lawyer Sharp, the other now proved to be a well-dressed, grinning elderly ruffian, whom neither Willis nor Harold remembered to have ever met before.

Willis's suspicions had all along been well-grounded.

They had again been entrapped by Hardman, and this time into the very bosom of his desperate crew, perhaps comprising, judging by the villainous countenances of eight or ten men surrounding them, the very elite of the Scalp-Lock Brotherhood.

"Sold again!" ejaculated Harold, reeling back a step or two, but reaching for his revolver.

"I felt it in my bones!" grimly muttered the

detective, imitating his example. "Back to back, my boy!"

But this was easier said than done, for by this time the entire gang had hemmed them in, and they were looking directly down the mouths of two leveled revolvers in the hands of the petticoated Hardman and his immediate companion.

They made a gallant resistance, but were soon overpowered.

"Game lads, both on ye!" grinningly commented one of the ruffians, while admiringly manipulating Harold's handsomely-curling fair hair; "but a leetle inconvenient in the way of a scalp-lock, young feller."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A PERILOUS PREDICAMENT.

"SAME fault with this 'un," said another scoundrel, also lifting off the Rocket Detective's tile to inspect his lirsute possessions, which were considerably darker and even shorter than Harold's. "Pooty hair, mighty pooty, an' jest as slick as a school-gal's! but still not much on the trophy line. Eh, Jeff?"

And then they both turned with mock-deference to Hardman, while their companions burst into an uproarious laugh.

Hardman had by this time torn off his feminine disguise.

Deadly, concentrated hatred was still the ruling expression in his dark features, and, though he had put up his revolver, he did not seem to sympathize a jot with the coarse jollity of his desperate subordinates.

"Enemies! Contemptible sleuth-hounds!" he snarled, confronting the captives with a rage that was all the more terrible for its partial suppression, "so you once more thought me in your clutches? Fools! dupes! is it not again my turn to laugh at you?"

"You don't seem altogether jocose about it, though," observed Willis, easily.

"By no means," said Harold. "Why, Hardman, you must do better than this, if you expect to succeed as end-man in your minstrel show."

Hardman gnashed his teeth.

Then, suddenly producing the jewel-bilted Venetian poniard, he flourished it malignantly before their eyes.

"See!" said he. "It is still in my possession; were it not for my reserving you for a more terrible fate, with this dagger would I at this moment drain your hearts' blood!"

"How did you steal it this last time?" asked Harold, affably. "I can readily imagine how you robbed me of it first, just a little previous to murdering Arabella Hanshaw with the same, but how did you fake it from the Police Department property clerk? That is what puzzles us."

Hardman managed to smile.

"I will tell you," said he, with growing self-control, "though I did not murder Arabella Hanshaw, as the world will one day discover."

This was said with an unaffected air of truthfulness that considerably staggered and mystified both Willis and Harold.

"As for the dagger," Hardman went on, "I acknowledge stealing it in both instances. In the first instance, the theft was the result of a long and patient study of your habits and of your relations with Miss Hanshaw, with the express view of fastening suspicion on you, after the murder in contemplation should have been perpetrated."

They were still further bewildered, for here he was almost the same as confessing the crime on the very heels, it would seem, of denying it.

"In the next instance," he continued, "the explanation is equally simple. I stole it from Heintzelman, with whom the property clerk had temporarily intrusted the weapon, and who—curse him!—was of treacherous intent toward me almost from the first moment."

He again flashed the dagger before their eyes.

"Hold on now, pop!" piped a shrill voice from the neighboring thickets. "Remember your promise to me. If there's any carving up of these galoots to be done, I'm to do it!"

A sort of laughing cheer broke from the band as Master Cowby was seen pantingly approaching.

In addition to his juvenile field-piece of a revolver which he was lugging after him in one hand, with the other he trailed along a bowie-knife of no less ridiculous proportions, as contrasted with his personal diminutiveness.

"Yes, pop, just count me in, if any carvin's in the wind!" the little monstrosity continued to chirp. "For you ought to know by this time that carvin's my special style."

"Give 'em an example of it, Diamond!" guffawed one of the band, in whom the prisoners recognized one of the oarsmen in the adventure of the preceding night. "Show 'em what you kin do with the sticker, Cowby!"

"All right," was the squeaking reply.

Then, somehow with a twirl and a flash, the great knife quitted his hand.

There was a hurling whizz, and it was seen quivering in the center of a distinguishing round, white spot on the trunk of a silver-birch tree more than twenty paces distant.

Then he once more began to prance and curvet around, for the special delectation of the pris-

oner, when Hardman rather unceremoniously brushed him aside.

"You're not going to be carved up any more than you're going to be shot, my beauties!" said the Texan, once more addressing them. "Can you guess the fate in store for the pair of you?"

Harold yawned, while Willis assumed an ineffably bored expression.

"Oh, for God's sake, give us a rest!" he sighed. "Or gives us whatever doom you choose, but, above all, spare us your heroics. You are worse than the seven years' itch!"

The unaffected disgust and ennui of these words excited the reluctant admiration of most of the band, but they only added fuel to Hardman's spitefulness and fury.

"Look at that little house yonder!" he cried, indicating the low, solid-looking stone building on the bank of the inlet, already alluded to.

"Do you know what it is?"

"Oh, get out!" sighed Willis. "You make us tired."

"Humor him! humor him!" persisted Harold, in his same tone; after which he turned to their interlocutor with a suave simplicity, continuing:

"It's a church, isn't it—or perhaps a palace?"

"No, curse you! it's a powder magazine!" roared the Texan. "They manufacture explosives hereabouts, and that's one of their store-houses."

"You don't say so!" exclaimed Harold. "Now you are growing interesting."

"Yes," said Willis, bridling up with a sudden air of animation. "Shall we really be shown around the works?"

"You're to be chucked into the magazine and blown up with its contents—you both!" raved Hardman. "Here!" and he turned to the band; "off with their scalp-locks, and then hurry up the job!"

The captives, who had been partly relieved of the clutching hands, were again seized, and it became really evident that they were to be actually submitted to the ordeal of the Scalp-Lock Brotherhood.

But just here there was a diversion created in the entertainment by a glad cry in a woman's voice.

It was the voice of Mrs. Golightly, who was seen running down the narrow path toward the group.

"Jeff! my Jefferson!" she cried, and straightway threw herself into Hardman's arms, to his mingled satisfaction and embarrassment. "Thank Heaven, I am with you at last! Ah, and you have our young men safely secured, too?"

She threw a spiteful look at the prisoners, while still partly remaining in the bravo's embrace.

"Yes, my charmer!" responded Hardman, rapidly regaining his good-humored devilry. "And, what is still better, the fire is built for them, and you are just in time for the toasting."

"I am glad of that," she murmured, looking with a sort of pleased wonder around upon the desperate men, some of whom seemed to maintain their composure with difficulty, while others were on the broad grin. "And are these the fearless and devoted followers you have told me so much about?"

"Yes."

"Well, now, this is romantic!" exclaimed the widow, clasping her plump little gloved hands. "Dear me! it's like the 'Robbers of the Rhine,' or the 'Bandits of the Danube,' or something or other I've read about in novels."

"Oh, we're heroes, ma'm, every mother's son on us!" exclaimed one fellow, with a flourish.

"I don't doubt it—indeed, I don't," said the ridiculous widow. "But are you really as romantic as you look?"

"You bet we are, man, every time! We're just nothin', if not romantic. Come, boys, whoop up this scalpin' business, an' then we'll give the fair leddy a song or a dance, while the young fellers is bein' made fast inter the powder-magazine."

Here Hardman whispered in the widow's ear.

"Oh, that is excellent!" she cried. "With that minx, Helen Whitback, preparing for marriage with the hangman, what can be better than this immolation of Harold Markoe and Willis Hawley on the altar of the Bandit's Revenge! Here's romance in plenty!"

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE RESCUE.

"Ah, Jeannette!" mournfully murmured Harold at this juncture, piteously rolling his eyes; "you can't be in earnest with regard to me, at least?"

"Can't I?" snapped the widow.

"But think how I once adored you!" he persisted. "Recall the oysters, the ice-cream and the caramels you stood me in for in the old, sweet days."

"I do recall them!" furiously cried the widow, accepting it all as in earnest, notwithstanding that a majority of the ruffians themselves were also enjoying the joke; "and it is all that that makes me pitiless. You scorned me for—for another! That suffices. I shall positively rejoice in your dying agonies!"

There was no doubt about her really meaning it, either.

Then came Willis's turn.

"But what have I done?" he half-sobbed. "Contemplate me, lovely Jeannette! True, I never oystered, or ice-creamed, or carmeled you, but oh, how I did worship you in secret!"

"It's a lie! you never did!" raved the widow.

"You only made fun of me from first to last."

"I!" with a sadly reproachful gaze.

"Yes, you! And I pity you no more than I do Harold Markoe. 'Why,' she added, turning to Hardman, "don't you bid your merry men dispose of these wretches without further delay? It ain't romantic to tarry so long in wreaking the red revenge of the ruthless Robbers of the Rhine. They never suffer things to drag so in the romance books."

Here Hardman made a sign, and the prisoners were once more seized by the ruffianly hands, this time with angry roughness.

"Hurry up!" growled the Texan. "We must be out of the State before nightfall."

But at this juncture there was a shot, and then Sharp's clerk and Heintzelman, followed by half a dozen or more armed men, mostly porters, waiters and stable-men from the adjoining hotel grounds, came rushing with a loud shout upon the scene.

Mrs. Golightly shrieked, while Hardman drew his shooter, and the rest of the gang were seized with a momentary panic.

"Just what I've been expecting!" cried Willis, and he availed himself of the general confusion to possess himself of a bludgeon.

Harold imitated his example with equal success, and then they began to lay about them with a furious will and energy that made up for lost time, while Heintzelman and his crowd joined in the assault with no less vim and effect.

Hardman and most of the outlaws were put to flight, while Mrs. Golightly fainted, and Cowby was among the prisoners taken.

Hardman, after discharging some chambers of his revolver ineffectively, had rushed away in the direction of the inlet, and both Willis and Harold, with a stalwart countryman, were on his individual track.

Harold, indeed, being foremost in the pursuit, had well-nigh overtaken him when he caught his foot in a root and tumbled headlong.

Willis tripped and tumbled over his body in turn, and then the rustic, also losing his foothold on the uneven ground, pitched forward his entire length, and then went rolling down a slight declivity, at the bottom of which was the alleged powder magazine.

Before any one of them could regain his feet, Hardman, with a glare behind him like that of a baffled wolf, slipped out of sight behind the building.

The rustic who had rolled almost to the side of the building before recovering himself, was leisurely getting upon his feet with an amused grin on his broad, rather stupid face, when he was interrupted by being blown into eternity!

There had been a flash, a blaze, a deafening roar, a concussion that threw both Harold and Willis down, and even prostrated some large trees in the immediate vicinity of the spot, and when they came to look again, the magazine had completely disappeared.

Far out on the inlet, a little beyond where the magazine had stood, was a moving black speck.

"It is the head of a swimmer!" cried Harold.

"Quick, Willis; a boat! It must be the villain Hardman, and we can overhaul him."

But Heintzelman, who was now on the scene, with pretty much every one else in the neighborhood, laid his hand on his arm.

"Be in no haste, sir," said he. "A boat will be obtained for you in a few minutes, and, in the mean time, the ultimate escape of yonder desperate villain is next to impossible."

"How do you make out that?" said Harold. "There is a yet denser wood over there that he is making for."

"True, but it is a mere neck of land that he can know nothing about, and we can easily cut him off by a shore line of pursuit, while you are following him by water. Have patience; I have already organized everything."

Harold now turned to perceive Willis in conversation with Lawyer Sharp's clerk, who was an unusually bright young fellow named Barrow.

Nearly the entire population of the Point, including the excursionists at the pleasure resort, was now gathered at and about the spot; while the prisoners, seven in number, including the irrepressible Cowby, were lying bound on the ground a short distance away.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

AFTER THE BATTLE.

"LAWYER SHARP has been a little ahead of us both in his quiet way, Harold," said Willis, a little sadly. "He seems to have almost foreseen everything just as it has taken place, from what Mr. Barrow tells me, and to have provided the best and surest means to supplement our shortsightedness in these complicated affairs."

The trio had come together in a group somewhat apart from the rest.

The young clerk, Barrow, now proceeded to tell Harold, as he had already told Willis, with

what thoroughness the old lawyer's measures had been carried out, beginning from the moment that he, Barrow, had been quietly put on Mrs. Golightly's track at the time of her quitting the down-town office that morning.

It now occurred to Harold to ask about Mrs. Golightly, when he was informed that she had been carried to the hotel, and placed under guard there.

A sad feature of the day's tragedy at this moment occurred as a number of rough country fellows filed past the spot, bearing on a covered litter such of the remains of the unfortunate rustic who had been blown to pieces as had been gathered together.

The victim's name was Golden, and he had been a great favorite with his associates, many of whom were shedding tears over his untimely end.

Then Heintzelman came up to say that the boat was in readiness, and that Harold and Willis could now continue their pursuit of Hardman, while the main body of pursuers were making a *detour* around the isolated forest into which he had by this time taken refuge.

As the two friends were starting off down to the water, a faint voice called to them.

It was the voice of Master Cowby, who, propped in a sitting posture, with his back against a tree, was bound so tightly as to be hardly capable of movement, and they approached him.

But as he spoke, he still assumed a half-dignified, half-patronizing air that had seemed to have grown a part of his ridiculous little personality.

"Young sirs," said he, "as I take it, you are hardly the sort of men to crow too vociferously over a fallen foe!"

"No, my little man, we are not," said Willis genially. "And in that respect we are somewhat different from you and yours."

Cowby made a wry face, but he appeared to be suffering, and they really had no disposition to be harsh with him, much trouble as he had given them.

"I'm glad to see you magnanimously inclined," he went on, "for I—I would like to ask a favor—a very great favor—at your lordly hands."

"What can we do for you?"

"My arms are bound so tight that the circulation is clean knocked out. Would you mind just reachin' into my left coat-tail pocket?"

"What for?"

"A fresh chaw of tobacco. I'm just dyin' by inches for one."

Harold laughed, but Willis was more sympathetically disposed.

"I'll do better than that for you," said he. "I shall so far relieve you of your bonds as will give you some freedom of movement, and then you can get the tobacco for yourself."

He suited the action to the word, and the little reprobate positively evinced some emotion, as he weakly fumbled for his tobacco, and finally managed to stuff his cheek with a prodigious quid.

"Mr. Hawley, I thank you," he said. "This desperate game is about up now, and if I can ever do you a kindness in return, just count on the iron right arm and lion heart of Cowby Hardman."

His utterance was much fainter, and it was evident that the little fellow's exhaustion and pain were greater than had first been apparent.

"You can return me the kindness right away, and with interest, if you choose," said Willis.

"In what way, sir?"

"By answering me truthfully one or two questions."

"I'll do it," was the response, still fainter, but with the ring of earnestness.

"How old are you?"

"Eighteen last June. My growth was stunted when I was a mere child by a great shock."

"What sort of shock, Cowby?"

"My mother was hanged by a Sonora mob, and I—I was compelled to witness it. She wasn't a very good woman, you see; in fact, I reckon she was just the other thing, but still she—she was—she was—my mother!"

The words died on his lips, and his eyelids drooped.

The boy had fainted.

Willis and Harold hurried away to their boat, after leaving the little fellow in charge of a couple of sympathetic women, who had chanced to witness the strange scene.

"A thousand curses on the social conditions that could so stunt, warp and deprave a child-life by such systematic brutality!" exclaimed Harold, as they were rowing across—for no carman had volunteered his services, and they had determined to go alone. "It is no more than retribution that the boy has developed into the irreclaimable young villain that he is."

"I agree with you as to the lad's comparative irresponsibility," said Willis, more dispassionately. "But don't call him irreclaimable until some attempt at reformation has been tried on him. While there is a God of mercy, there is hope."

Though the inlet they were crossing was fully half a mile in width, Hardman had been seen to swim it with ease, thus testifying to his bold spirit and athletic powers.

Willis and Harold made fast at or near a point where he had been seen to effect a landing, and then struck cautiously into the wood, following a sort of blind path.

"Thank fortune," said Harold, "that the villain's long swim must have hopelessly ruined all his ammunition, or he might ambuscade us now at his pleasure!"

Crack! ping!

Then the whistle of a leaden messenger passed his ear.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

BUSH FIGHTING.

"FACE down! quick!" exclaimed Willis, who had been in the Western country, and understood something of Indian fighting. "There! now don't speak above a whisper, and keep your eyes peeled."

They had thrown themselves on their faces in the underbrush, and none too soon, for another shot had followed the first, and had Willis remained erect, he must have caught it in his body.

But they had this time noted the locality from which they had been fired upon, and Harold, while still crouching low; was getting his pistol ready to respond in kind, when his companion restrained him.

"Don't shoot till you can see him," said he, in a low voice, "and he won't give you that opportunity for some time yet, depend on it."

"But I know about where he is."

"No you don't, for a certainty, but only where he was when he fired. He may be yards away from there now, swiftly circling around us on his belly like a snake."

"But he has already located us."

"But will he know that we have remained in the one place, if we fail to notify him?"

Harold sighed, and seemed by no means satisfied.

"Good Lord!" said he, after an uneventful pause; "are we to remain here hugging the earth forever, for fear of being shot?"

Instead of answering, the detective, who, with his head slightly raised had seen a scarcely perceptible motion in the underbrush tops about fifty yards away, softly leveled his revolver, took steady aim, and fired.

There was a sharp exclamation, accompanied by something like an oath, in the distance, that was just audible, and no more.

Quick—follow me!"

And Willis glided off on all fours to the right, his companion imitating his example as well as he could.

It was a timely movement, for a moment later shot after shot rung out, and the spot they had just deserted was cut over by as many successive bullets that went whistling through the underbrush.

"Now's the time!" said the detective. "There's his smoke for a target. Pop away."

Harold responded on the instant, and then they did pop away together as long as their charges held out, after which they made haste to alter the crouching position once more.

After this there were no further indications from the enemy.

"He may be playing possum," said Willis, "but let us still be prudent. I am sure I touched him somewhere on that first shot."

"Yes; I heard him cry out distinctly."

"He may be dead up there in his tracks, for all we know, after the enfilading we have given him. But it won't do to take any chances."

He placed his hat on the muzzle of his six-shooter, which he had just recharged, and elevated it slightly over the top of the brush, agitating it gently as if a head might be inside of it.

But the ruse did not elicit another shot, all remaining silent.

"We'll give him ten minutes, and then, if there is no demonstration, we'll crawl up on his position—that is, if he shall not have skipped."

The ten minutes passed uneventfully, and then they proceeded to put the maneuver into operation.

To their astonishment, it led them to the mouth of a narrow cave.

It was partly closed up by a great stone, but the probability that the fugitive had first disappeared into the cavern was attested by some drops of blood on the ground just outside of the entrance, and on the stone itself.

"He's been wounded, and then crawled in here," whispered Willis. "Was ever anything so desperate? Keep to one side, however. A shot from the interior may be awaiting us."

After listening intently for some time at the mouth of the cave, they ventured to push back the stone.

It fell with a crash, revealing, as far as they could judge, the entrance to a cave of perhaps indefinite length and magnitude, though, of course, they were not so foolhardy as to attempt its exploration.

Naturally enough, the unknown interior of the cavern was pitch dark, and to have ventured therein might have placed them at the fugitive's mercy, should he have remained lurking anywhere amid its depths.

Leaving Harold to guard the entrance, Willis

started off at once for the boat, which they had left but two or three hundred yards behind, his object being to communicate with Heintzelman and the other searchers.

Harold settled himself down, revolver in hand, to watch faithfully over the cavern entrance.

But hardly five minutes had elapsed before he heard Willis calling to him to hasten to the water's edge.

"What is the matter?" cried Harold, as he came running out on the inlet shore with a rush.

"No need of guarding the cave-entrance up yonder," said Willis, despondently. "Look!"

He pointed to another cavern entrance in a low bank close at hand, which had somehow escaped their notice on landing.

"What of that?" said Harold. "This doesn't necessarily communicate with the same cave."

"Yes, it does; and Hardman has escaped by it, after making his way through the entire length of the subterranean passage."

"Impossible!"

"It is true."

"But how do you know this?"

"What has become of our boat?"

It was gone.

There could not be a doubt that Hardman had made off in it.

"Let us be thankful that he did not attack us in the rear, instead," said Willis. "He might easily have killed us both."

At this moment they heard several voices.

CHAPTER XL.

THE OUTLAWS AT BAY.

THE owners of the voices proved to be Heintzelman, Barrow and four or five constables.

The new-comers fortunately had with them two or three large baskets filled with provisions, with which Willis and Harold were glad enough to satisfy the cravings of their hunger, and they had also brought with them four or five rabbit-dogs that might be of service.

One of the constables was an intelligent rustic, who had lived all his life in the vicinity, and was very familiar with the woods they were in, which he said had at one time been called Burnett's Woods.

"The place is full of just this sort of caves," said he, "and it has had a bad reputation ever since I can remember. Charcoal-burners used to frequent it away back in the Revolutionary days, and some of their huts and cabins are still to be found scattered here and there. The woods are also much more extensive than are generally supposed, and, unless we can run our man to earth between now and morning, I fancy he will have a good chance to give us the go-by. He wouldn't be the first bad man who has managed to escape pursuit in Burnett's Woods."

"But won't our man have a chance to escape elsewhere by the boat he has made off with?" said Willis.

"I think not," said the constable, whose name was Yerks. "Mr. Heintzelman has already taken the precaution to send a large boat around, to patrol the outer point, and on all other sides is an open country, with farmers and villagers on the lookout for him. The explosion of the magazine has notified the entire country-side of what is going on."

"That is true," said the police detective. "Hardman has doubtless only availed himself of the boat to land at some other point on this neck of land, and it is scarcely possible that he has ventured to leave it altogether."

Before twilight a plan of search was agreed on.

Lanterns were in abundance, and it was agreed that the party, numbering eight men in all, should, after the usual manner, spread out like a fan, and in this way beat across the wooded neck, which was nearly half a mile in average width, back and forth, repeating the process, if necessary, all night, until the fugitive or fugitives should be unearthed.

This plan having been adopted, the men (it was now almost dusk) were beginning to spread out in accordance with it, each carrying a lantern in one hand and a stout cudgel in the other, when the dogs suddenly gave tongue, and started one after another in a bee-line for a point in the very center of the wood.

"Come on!" cried Yerks, "they're maybe making for Dead Man's Cabin." And, forgetting the fan-shaped arrangement, the party were soon following his lead.

On reaching the spot, a ruinous little old log hovel on an island formed by the only brook in the wood, there was a shot from its interior, the bullet cutting the air, it seemed, high up over the assailants' heads.

Cautiously, but amid much suppressed excitement, the cabin was surrounded.

Then shot after shot came from every side of it, proving that several fugitives had found refuge within its walls, though the bullets were all aimed high, as if with a first intention of merely warning off the attacking party.

Heintzelman waved his lantern back and forth as a railroad signalman might have done, and a lull in the firing ensued.

"How many of you are in there?" he called out.

"All that is left of us," responded a sturdy voice, that was surely not that of Hardman.

"But how many of you?"

"Take us, and find out!"

"I summon you to surrender, in the name of the law!"

A laugh and some curses replied.

"The entire wood is surrounded," called out Heintzelman again. "Your ultimate capture is certain. Once more I summon you to give in!"

More curses, this time accompanied by a continuance of the firing.

The surrounding brook was easily enough leaped at any point, but the little island on which the cabin stood was cleared land, so that great risk would be incurred in crossing it, should the besieged take it into their heads to resist with a more directly murderous intent.

No ammunition had as yet been wasted by the assailants, who were somewhat puzzled.

A sort of council of war was presently held, under cover of course, both Willis and Harold being of the number.

"Had we better open fire on the cabin," said Heintzelman, "with the chance of wounding some of them through the log-cracks, or simply lie low and hang about in the hope of wearing out their patience?"

"I vote for opening fire from under cover," said Barrow.

The Rocket Detective said nothing.

Barrow's plan was adopted. Word passed around the line, and the firing began.

It was kept up for half an hour, or more, but elicited nothing but derisive shouts and an occasional shot from the besieged. Then it ceased, and another parley was had, but with no better result than at first.

"You might as well make off, and let us slide," was the burden of all that could be evoked from the men at bay. "You can't hurt us, while we're bound to kill you if you try to carry us by storm."

"But you couldn't 'slide,' even if we were to make off," cried Heintzelman, who was a prudent and humane man, anxious to avoid unnecessary bloodshed.

"Can't we?"

"No; I've already told you that every avenue of escape is guarded."

"We'll attend to that."

So the second parley ended, and the useless firing was resumed.

It was now past seven o'clock, with only such light as the lanterns, together with the straggling beams of the newly-risen moon, afforded.

The Rocket Detective, finding himself close to Harold, touched elbows with him, and they drew apart.

"I have a plan," said he.

"What is it?"

"It seems evident to me that these rascals are bent on sacrificing themselves in order to facilitate his escape out of the wood."

"What is your plan?"

"That you follow the course of the brook to its mouth, while I trace it upward, in the hope of coming upon some trail of the master villain between us. The diversion won't consume more than an hour or two, at most, and we are of no use hereabouts."

"Agreed," assented Harold.

Accordingly, with a parting grasp of the hand, and without saying anything of their intention to the others, they separated, in pursuance of this determination.

CHAPTER XLI.

HAROLD'S SOLITARY TRAIL.

HAROLD had not gone far before he perceived that he was being accompanied by one of the little rabbit-dogs belonging to the main party.

In half an hour he succeeded in reaching the mouth of the brook, on the outer shore of the point, without having met with any adventure.

At this juncture, however, the dog darted ahead of him along the narrow beach, and suddenly disappeared.

But he soon found him again, snuffing at a hole in the wooded bank.

Something impelled Harold to examine the hole, and he stooped down to clear away some roots and dangling vines that obstructed it.

As he did so, a huge rock, which constituted a considerable section of the bank, unexpectedly swung back, revealing the entrance to a cave of such magnitude that a man could step into it erect.

Greatly astonished, Harold stepped a short distance into the cavern, and looked about him curiously, the dog keeping close to his legs.

Back of the cave there opened a passage, which impressed him with the idea of its leading back indefinitely under the surface of the wood.

Then something lying on the threshold of this inner passage caught his eye, and he picked it up.

It was a piece of blood-stained bandage, not yet wholly stiffened by the chill air of the cave, and consequently, it would seem, but recently lost or thrown aside from some fresh wound.

The thought suddenly flashed upon the explorer that the passage might communicate directly with the cabin in which the ruffians

were besieged, and that the bandage had been on Hardman's person.

To think was to act with Harold Markoe, and, after first taking the precaution to close the rock-door of the outer cave behind him, he prepared to enter the passage, accompanied by the little dog, which was fortunately not of a barking or noisy breed.

Holding the lantern high above his head, he entered the passage forthwith, and began to thread its tortuous course, followed by the dog.

The passage soon became difficult, its roof remaining sufficiently high, but the walls gradually contracting so closely that it was sometimes necessary to proceed sidewise.

Still, he managed to squeeze along, and presently the passage slightly widened, so that progress was less painful.

But at this juncture the little dog plunged forward a number of yards, and then remained looking back wistfully, as much as to say, "Lookout now; here's another surprise for you!"

Harold shook his finger at him, and pushed on with increased caution.

At the next crook of the passage, where the animal had made its warning pause, a dim light was seen burning a short distance ahead.

Cautiously advancing, the young man found himself at the entrance of a chamber, formed by the abrupt widening of the passage, in which, on a rudely-extemporized pallet, with a candle burning down into its socket beside him, lay a wounded man asleep.

His head was bound up with bloody rags, making it apparent that he had only made his escape from the fight of the afternoon after sustaining severe injuries.

But, much to Harold's satisfaction, the sleeper's bandages were of calico, while the one that he had picked up was originally white, thus making it more likely that Hardman himself had worn it, either while passing into or out of the passage.

Making sure that the sleeping man had no weapons with which he might, if suddenly awakened, institute a rear attack upon him, Harold lost no time in stepping softly across the cave, and pursuing his course through the continuation of the passage beyond.

He rightly conjectured that he had now reached a point about midway to the island cabin—if such should prove the termination of the passage—and, as the way was now less difficult, he proceeded much more rapidly.

Pretty soon scattering shots were indistinctly heard; then the passage made a deep dip, which he felt sure was taking him under the bed of the brook; after this it gradually arose and passed on at its former level.

Then he suddenly came to where further progress was barred by a heavy wooden door, with a small grated panel at the top, through which he could look directly into the one large room which was all that the cabin contained.

CHAPTER XLII.

THE ROCKET DETECTIVE'S MASTER-STROKE.

THIS panel, by reason of the subterranean passage being so much lower than the cabin level, afforded him little more than a view of the feet of the men inside, who appeared to be five or six in number, and were industriously engaged in replying to the fire of the besiegers.

Nevertheless, Harold, without an instant's hesitation, set up an appalling yell, and at once opened fire with his revolver on the feet and shins of the inmates.

Instantly, as may be surmised, the inmates were thrown into the utmost panic and despair, while a loud cheer from without responded to the explorer's yell, and then Harold knew that an assault was being made on the cabin by the besiegers.

In a few minutes the cabin door was battered down, then the passage door was forced, and Harold was helped up out of the tunnel by Heintzelman, Barrow, Yerks and the rest, with the companionable little rabbit-dog at his heels.

As a matter of course, he was the hero of the occasion; but what had become of the besieged ruffians?

Every one of them had disappeared, as if by magic.

At last the mystery was explained by the appearance of another sunken door, wide open, just opposite the one by which Harold had been hauled up into the room.

"After them!" shouted Harold, pointing to the place. "See! the subterranean passage is continued north of the house, and they are trying to escape by it. After them! Willis may have blocked them off in that way, as I did in the other. Follow me! we'll like enough take them front and rear, between two fires!"

He darted down the steep steps into the continuation of the passage, waving his lantern with a loud shout, and the others crowded enthusiastically in his wake.

The pursuit was unobstructed for a considerable distance, when suddenly shots were heard far ahead, mingled with shouts, curses and savage cries.

Then the ruffians came rushing back, pell-mell.

"Hurrah!" cried Harold, leveling his revolver.

"They've been driven back from the entrance, as I predicted. We have got them dead!"

In the mean time, the Rocket Detective, after separating from his chum, had also experienced much difficulty in pursuing his solitary course up the brook, by reason of the woodland constantly growing more uneven and even precipitous in that direction.

However, he persevered in his course, and at last came out upon a broken but comparatively open space, which he rightly conjectured as being the narrow neck of the wooded peninsula.

He could see clear across, in the moonlight, from one inlet to another, while further on back lay the cultivated farms and pleasant house-grounds from among which he had been assured that volunteer patrols would be posted in abundance, to detect the first sign of any escape off in the direction of the shore-line railroad.

Still Willis could not help thinking that this would doubtless be the chosen route of a desperate criminal like Hardman, bent on slipping through the cordon of his foes at any cost.

The neck of land seemed entirely deserted now, but presently there was a low, shrill whistle, so evidently artificial as to put him at once on the alert.

He drew back into the shadow of the rocks and woods, from which he had momentarily advanced, and, setting his lantern behind him, watched and waited.

The whistle was repeated, and then followed by a shrill call, something like an imitation of an owl's tu-whit, tu-whoo!

Then a small figure came stealing crouchingly across the moonlight, slipping cautiously from rock to rock and bush to bush, while apparently keeping its gaze fastened anxiously upon a certain spot in a rough, overhanging bank hearing the brawling waters of the brook.

At last the figure seemed to pause despairingly, and there was a waiting hush.

As it did so, the moonlight fell upon its outlines to their complete revelation.

It was the boy Cowby!

Willis in another instant had slipped behind the boy, securing and gagging him before he could make a single outcry.

The little fellow was weak and almost exhausted in the first place, while his wrists still showed the cruel marks of the thongs from which he was newly escaped.

Nevertheless, the silent look that he upturned in the moonlight to his captor was full of the old-time pomposity and condescension that seemed unquenchable.

A moment later Cowby, mute and helpless, was thrust out of sight behind a clump of bushes, and the detective crouched in the place the boy had occupied, with the latter's silver whistle in his hand, fixed his eyes eagerly on the same spot in the face of the bank which had so riveted the other's attention.

This was a square, reddish-looking space, about four feet high by two in breadth, that was almost wholly concealed from view by overhanging roots and vines.

On a venture Willis blew the whistle thrice, and then sounded the bird-cry.

There was a reply, seeming like a faint echo from somewhere in the bowels of the earth.

The Rocket Detective smiled, and settled down a little lower behind the great stone that was between him and the overhanging bank.

At the same time there was a little gasping sort of groan from not far away.

It was from the gagged Cowby, whom Willis could see contemplating him with a look of despair, hatred and supplication, condensed in the expression of this strained, impish little face.

"Three times three are nine," muttered Willis, and, bending his piercing gaze once more on the reddish square under the tangles in the bank, he sounded the double-call successively just that number of times.

He had divined shrewdly.

The reddish square was a cavern-mouth door, which suddenly opened, and Jefferson Hardman stepped cautiously out into the moonlight.

He looked like a wild man at bay, and in each hand he carried a cocked revolver.

He searched the open, moon-lighted ground with an anxious gaze, as if for an anticipated messenger or friend who was not forthcoming.

He advanced yet another step, but hesitatingly, as though still reluctant to go far from the cave that had thus far proved a harbor and a refuge.

Then the Rocket Detective bounded upon him with the unerring deadliness of the striped monarch of the Bengal jungle upon his shrinking prey.

There was a mingled shout and a hoarse cry; the outlaw's six-shooters went flying away in different directions before a thought could be given to their purpose, and then over and over on the moonlit sward they rolled in the mighty grapple for the mastery which comes to few men howsoever adventurous and desperate, more than once in a lifetime.

Over and over, and finally even down a long slope nearly to the edge of the brawling brook!

It was no unequal fight, either; for young, vigorous, active, brave and athletic as was the amateur detective, the Texan desperado,

though much the smaller man, and wounded into the bargain, was equally quick and strong, with a hundredfold the other's deperate experience, and besides, he was fighting for something more than his liberty—for his very neck.

At last, however, Willis succeeded in striking his opponent a tremendous blow under the ear, from the force of which they were momentarily separated, in such a way that they could only crouch and glare at each other in mutual helplessness.

CHAPTER XLIII.

HARDMAN'S LAST CARD.

"You still have your pistol, while I am unarmed!" gasped the outlaw with a sneer. "Why don't you finish me?"

Willis tore his pistol out of his hip-pocket, cast it from him, and again precipitated himself on his unconquered antagonist.

But Hardman had lied; he had not been wholly disarmed.

As they closed in a fresh grapple, there was a lightning-like flash, and the jeweled Venetian dagger glittered in the moonlight.

Before Willis could evade the stroke the keen blade had slightly pierced the fleshy part of his left arm.

But that treacherous blow was the exhausted bravo's final effort.

It excited Willis to a species of frenzy.

The poniard was torn from Hardman's grasp, and then he was hurled upon his back, and nailed to the earth with an iron knee upon each outstretched arm.

"It is an hour for enforced restitution!" panted the triumphant detective. First, the dagger; now—this!"

Ripping open the helpless foe's waistcoat, he drew out the precious package that had once before, but for a single instant, been in his possession.

As he did so, the package fell apart, and its contents—the severed tress, caught at the top with a knotted wire—rippled out into the luminous night air in crisped splendor—a double trophy now, signaling no less the murderer's deed than the law's retributive clutch.

"You've won it fair and square!" groaned the outlaw faintly. "Whistle up your fellow sleuth hounds, and then chuck me to the hangman!"

But at this instant, something cold pressed against the victor's temple, and there was an ominous click in his ear.

He dodged just in time to avoid a bullet that whistled by his head, and turned to perceive the indomitable and apparently inseparable Cowby, who, having effected his release in some mysterious way, had crawled upon all-fours to his father's assistance—being too weak to walk—and was in the act of attempting yet another shot with Willis's own discarded revolver.

Forgetting everything but the boy's incorrigible malevolence in his momentary fury, Willis struck him senseless, as he would have crushed a small but venomous serpent under his heel.

He then lost no time in securing Hardman, hand and foot, though he was compelled to take off his own shirt and transform it into torn and twisted strips, in order to obtain the material necessary for the task.

After this, he staggered to his feet, intending to remain by his captive till he could manage to communicate with his friends, but just then he caught the sound of voices and echoing footsteps apparently coming from somewhere directly under his feet.

Instantly divining the true cause, he hastily possessed himself of his own revolver and the two that Hardman had lost in the primary struggle, and rushed to the mouth of the cave.

He was only just in time, for he could hear the approaching voices and footsteps of the desperadoes close at hand.

"Back! back to your island kennel!" he yelled, pouring shot after shot into the gloom of the passage. "Dogs! there is no room for you here. You must die like rats in their hole!"

There was a simultaneous storm of curses and oaths, and the steps were heard to retreat, while he still kept up his fusillade into the darkness.

Then there were other shots, like faint echoes of his own, away far back, and he gave himself a pause.

A yet longer rest ensued, which was presently broken by footsteps again advancing through the cave.

"Who is it?" shouted Willis, with his recharged six-shooter once more in readiness.

"Willis, it is I!"

And, as Harold bounded into the moonlight, the inseparables sprang into each other's arms for a brief embrace.

Harold was quickly followed by Heintzelman and the rest, with all the desperadoes, seven in number, as prisoners, and many of them badly wounded besides, especially about the feet and shins.

"Have you seen anything of Hardman?" was the first question of the victorious new-comers.

Willis merely said "Come!"

Then he led them to where Hardman and his son lay, and briefly gave the details of their capture.

An hour or two later, the victorious principals

in the foregoing stirring and tragic scenes were on their way back to New York, with all the prisoners in custody; and before Helen sought her couch for the last time in the Tombs prison that night she received a welcome notification of what had taken place.

CHAPTER XLIV.

LAWYER SHARP IS AGREEABLY SURPRISED.

BRIGHT and early on the following morning Willis Hawley and Harold Markoe did themselves the honor and satisfaction of calling on Mr. Lawyer Sharp at his residence at such an hour as they knew would preclude his having had access to the morning newspapers.

"Aha!" cried the old gentleman, who was putting the finishing touches on his toilet as they were shown into his dressing-room; "so you are here again, my young heroes?"

"Yes, Mr. Sharp, we are here again," said Willis, as he and Harold smilingly helped themselves to seats.

"And you are not looking especially shamefaced, either. Well, well; we are pretty tough-skinned in these youthful and degenerate days."

"But what ought we to be ashamed of, Mr. Sharp?"

"Don't you know that I had to obtain a postponement of Miss Whitback's examination in court yesterday afternoon on your account?"

"Yes; but in what way were we to blame for that?"

"Pish! What are we detectives for if desperate and specially-wanted criminals must perpetually slip through our iron grasp, our vise-like clutch, and all that sort of thing?" And the old gentleman threw a comically malicious look at Willis, especially.

Willis placidly twirled his decidedly becoming mustache.

"Ah, indeed!" he drawled. "How uncommonly well you are informed upon the current topics of the day, Mr. Sharp!"

The lawyer looked up quickly. There was something in the other's quizzing tone that seemed to telephone its masked importance.

"You haven't nabbed him already?" he exclaimed, with a blank look. "You won't dare to tell me that, my boy?"

The Rocket Detective shrugged his shoulders.

"You know my timidity, and are taking advantage of it," said he. "It isn't the fair thing, especially as I'm only an orphan. It's brutal!"

"Come, come; out with it!" And Mr. Sharp hopped around so briskly that he could hardly change his morning-wrapper for his business coat. "I sent off Barrow and Heintzelman on the run yesterday, and haven't heard from them since. But have you really accomplished something, my son?"

"You say the examination was postponed?" This with a languid yawn.

"Yes."

"To what time?"

"This morning at ten. Zounds, you rascal! are you intent on keeping me on pins and needles?"

Willis laughed.

"How will *that* pass at the examination?" he asked; and, drawing from his bosom the severed tress, the Rocket Detective dangled its shimmering beauty before the astonished lawyer's eyes.

Mr. Sharp was not given to emotional manifestations, but to say that he positively gasped with satisfaction on this occasion is not drawing it too strong.

"What! *the tress*?" he exclaimed. "Oh, my dear young friend! are you sure there is no mistake?"

"And how," continued the detective, imperiously, "will *this* look as an attendant dumb witness?" and he laid before him, on the center table the Venetian poniard!

The old lawyer's joy and impatience were now excessive.

"You have glorious news for me, you rogues!" he exclaimed. "I scented hypocrisy as soon as the pair of you entered the room. Is Hardman captured? Tell me all about it."

They now gave him the story in the fullest detail.

"It is marvelous!" was Mr. Sharp's comment.

Unfastening the upper ends of the severed tress from the silver wire that was knotted securely among them, he was curiously examining their appearance.

"See!" said he. "The three separate cuts are plainly distinguishable, thus identifying the murderer with the Brotherhood of the Scalp Lock!"

"Yes," said Harold, "but since so many of the infamous band are keeping their leader company in his arrest, this can no longer be of such vital importance."

"Not at present, perhaps, but in the future, yes!"

"How so?"

"Apart from Hardman, there is no particular charge against the band in this vicinity, as yet."

"Ah, I see; and the presenting of the tress in testimony may at any time stimulate corroborating confessions on the part of one or another of the gang?"

"For the well-being of the good people of

Texas, who have so long suffered from the Brotherhood's outrages. Exactly!"

The Rocket Detective was gazing sadly at the tress, which the old lawyer was carefully replacing in its package.

"Poor Arabella!" he murmured. "Who could have dreamed that a single tress of your beautiful hair would appear as a witness against your murderer?"

Mr. Sharp was betrayed into looking up at him with an expression of momentary astonishment.

"Arabella!" he repeated.

"Of course," said Willis, somewhat mystified.

"Oh, ah! I forgot."

"You forgot what, Mr. Sharp?"

"Oh, nothing, my boy. The examination is at ten, sharp. Don't forget, either one of you."

"We're not likely to," returned Harold. "But you, Mr. Sharp, seem to have forgotten something."

"What is it?"

"The price of the tress."

"The price?"

"Yes," struck in Willis. "Come; now for the fulfillment of your promise, conditional upon the tress being placed in your hands. The revelation! the revelation!"

"Come, and breakfast with me, both of you."

"Thanks; but the elucidation of the mystery will be an excellent appetizer."

"Bless you, no; it would be too long. You can surely afford to wait till court time for that. Come, along."

They accepted the delay, perforce.

"Still, you have apparently forgotten one thing more," added Willis, as they were going.

"What is that?"

"Your customary joke at my detective work."

The old lawyer grasped both his hands, shaking them heartily, and then did the same with Harold's.

"It was but to stimulate you to exertion that I ever joked at all," he cried. "Bless you both, my young friends! I am from this time forth prouder of you than words can say. And Willis, my boy, you have nobly and honestly won your spurs!"

"I wanted to hear you say that, of all men," confessed Willis, with a flush of pleasure.

"You would wish to become a professional detective, then?"

"Above all things else!"

"There's no accounting for tastes. But what is to prevent your becoming one? Your present income, though perhaps sufficient, is not gigantic, and the profession offers golden rewards for its bright particular stars at times."

"But you forget."

"Forget what?"

"That I am one of poor Arabella's heirs-at-law."

"Oh, so I did—yes, I had quite forgotten that! Come along to breakfast."

CHAPTER XLV.

REVELATION.

THE morning newspapers had been full of exciting accounts of the capture of Hardman and his desperate associates.

The examination of Miss Whitback was therefore held in comparative privacy, to which but a limited number of spectators were admitted.

Helen was looking somewhat pale as she was conducted by Mr. Sharp to her seat in the private examination room, but she was perfectly collected, and her beautiful face, moreover, wore a look of quiet confidence.

Near her sat a person who attracted even more attention than Hardman himself, who, haggard and pale, but apparently still defiant, was in custody not many feet away.

This was the now notorious veiled woman in gray, who was present, looking very mysterious, but also exciting much comment by her superb figure, which was so elegant as to redouble the curiosity with regard to her concealed face.

Hardman was observed to start violently on being first confronted with her, after which a singularly reckless, desperate expression came into his face, and he resumed his easy, nonchalant attitude.

His son was not present, it being understood that the little fellow was in the prison sick ward, with a high fever.

Hardman's affidavit, charging the prisoner Helen Whitback, with the murder of Arabella Hanshaw, and reciting a number of seemingly incriminating circumstances, was first read.

"What does the prisoner plead to the charge?" inquired Judge Guffy, as we shall call the presiding magistrate, turning to Helen's lawyer.

"Not guilty," replied Mr. Sharp, with a smile; "not guilty, may it please the Court, on the very simplest of grounds."

"To what do you refer?" said the judge.

"To the fact," said Mr. Sharp, "that Arabella Hanshaw was never murdered!"

This was the ruling sensation in reserve, and the quiet ease with which it was evolved, suggestive rather of an air-gun than of heavy ordnance, detracted in no degree from its effect.

There was a general movement of astonishment throughout the room.

"A most surprising statement!" exclaimed the magistrate.

"It is true, your Honor."

"Have you witnesses to support it?"

"But one, your Honor—an all-sufficient one, as I think your Honor will decide."

"Call your witness."

"Arabella Hanshaw!" called out the lawyer.

The veiled woman in gray quietly arose, and uncovered her face.

Harold uttered an exclamation of amazement, while Willis started from his seat, the picture of supreme and gratified bewilderment.

Hardman had anticipated the revelation, but he was none the less very pale, though collected.

"What have you to say to this?" demanded the court, addressing him with much severity of manner and tone.

"Who's under examination, me or the prisoner?" he snarled.

"You are also in custody. Answer the question."

"That woman is *not* Arabella Hanshaw, at all. She lies! She is my wife, Claudia Hanshaw, that was!"

The Court shrugged its shoulders and motioned to Mr. Sharp to proceed.

It was quite evident, notwithstanding the marvelousness of the revelation, that Hardman's brazenness would avail him nothing, and that no one expected it would less than he.

"Your name and residence?" queried the lawyer of his witness.

Both were given in a clear, melodious voice, that seemed to fall on the heart of Willis Hawley, for one, like a strain of theretofore imagined music.

"Where were you on the morning of the murder in the Belgrade apartment-house?"

"I was returning home from a moonlight river excursion—a public affair—in company with Harold Markoe."

"State what happened after you reached the door of your home."

"I separated from Mr. Markoe, and admitted myself into the house with my latch-key. It was about an hour before daybreak. The hall was almost, but not quite, dark, as I ascended the stairs to my apartments."

"To my surprise, the door leading into my private hall was not only unlocked, but open, and the light was turned down low in the parlor."

"As I passed in to turn up the gas, I perceived that all the doors communicating between the various rooms were open. I also perceived a man disappearing out of a rear window. As I turned up the gas, he vanished, but not before I had seen and recognized him as Jefferson Hardman, my sister Claudia's husband."

"Had the man recognized you?"

"No; he disappeared, evidently, without even suspecting my presence."

"How was the man attired?"

"Precisely as I am now."

"In woman's garments?"

"Yes."

"And with a veil?"

"Yes."

"How then could you first recognize him as a man, and subsequently as your sister's husband?"

"His motions were too masculine for his pretended character, and I saw his boots. Then, just as he was disappearing, the wind blew aside his veil, giving me a plain glimpse of his features."

"Did you cry out?"

"No, sir; I am not given to crying out."

"What did you next do?"

"Turned up the gas."

"What did you see?"

"First, the rooms in disorder; next, the dead body of my sister—murdered, as has been described at the coroner's inquest over my supposed remains."

"The murdered woman was your twin sister?"

"Yes; our personal resemblance had always been considered wonderful."

"And your sister had been living with you?"

"Yes; for a number of weeks I had been harboring her in secret, in the hope of concealing and protecting her from the brutal husband, who had discovered and murdered her at last."

A spasm of anguish passed over the witness's face, but she quickly resumed her self-possession.

"What did you do upon discovering the tragedy?"

"At first I was completely stunned. But I am naturally strong-minded, I think; and I had, moreover, been vaguely apprehending something of the sort for a long time. That is, a haunting but undefinable premonition had seemed to hover over me on my poor sister's account almost from the first hour after coming under my protection, for I knew something of the daring, desperate and utterly malevolent character of the man from whom she had escaped."

"Presently, I recovered from the over-mastering shock, and all seemed plain to me. Hard-

man, I knew, must have gained admission to my apartments during my absence, through his disguise. It was a counterpart of a costume sometimes worn by Claudia, Miss Whitback and myself. We thus dressed alike when abroad together, chiefly in Central Park, as a measure of safety for my sister, should her husband succeed in tracking her, as we felt certain that he was sparing no efforts to do. But the ruse by which we had hoped to baffle the villain had in fact aided him to his diabolical ends."

"He had procured a similar costume, which, by reason of his low stature and slender build, he was enabled to wear without detection. By this means, he must have frequently overheard many of our conversations, and thus been enabled to formulate his deadly plans."

"By this means he had made his way first into Mrs. Whitback's parlor, where he possessed himself of a note from me to Helen, making an appointment for her to visit me on the ensuing night. This was the note produced at the inquest, and which has helped to support the ridiculous charge against Miss Whitback. With this in his possession, he was enabled to get my servant, Bridget McWaters's, permission to remain in my parlor, ostensibly waiting for my return, notwithstanding the lateness of the hour."

"At exactly what time between Bridget's retiring and my return from the excursion, the murderer made the discovery of his prospective victim being asleep in the adjoining bed-chamber, which we occupied in common, and then accomplished her assassination, is known only to himself. The murder had probably been committed within half-an-hour of my return, for the poor body was still perfectly warm."

"After turning many things over in my mind, which seemed to grow sharpened at last by the very extremity of the situation, I decided upon a certain course of action, which I have steadily pursued to this hour."

"I hurriedly changed my costume for the gray one I had occasionally worn, possessed myself of a large sum of money which the murderous plunderer had overlooked, and stole out of the house."

"To my surprise, I saw a coach and pair waiting just around the corner. 'You've kept me waiting long enough,' said the coachman, as I approached. 'I've been here more than ten minutes, just as we stipulated.' I then understood that he must have been hired by the murderer, who had subsequently, doubtless through agitation, feared to make use of the equipage."

"Taking advantage of the situation, I stepped into the coach, and ordered the driver to proceed to Central Park, and through it until I should tell him to stop."

"He did so, letting me out at 110th street, and I paid him so liberally for his services that he willingly pledged himself to the secrecy, which it seems he has kept faithfully ever since."

"Where did you go, then?"

"To the house of a tenant and good friend of mine, in a secluded part of Harlem, where I have remained for the greater part of the time ever since."

"You have, however, held some secret communication with your friends?"

"With two only. With yourself, sir, and with Helen Whitback, who promised me to preserve my secret, at any cost, until such time as I should deem it expedient to relieve her from doing so."

"Do you still think that this strange course was a wise one?"

"I do not; though I did at the time of conceiving it, and subsequently, even when in doubt as to its wisdom, I deemed it better to see it through, rather than hastily retreat from the line of conduct I had chosen."

"Do you not recognize that it has entailed much needless suffering and humiliation upon Miss Whitback?"

The witness's lip trembled, and she exchanged a loving glance with Helen.

"I do recognize it; she has forgiven me."

"State to the Court your reasons for pursuing this strange course."

"I had an idea that it was only by this means that I could bring my sister's murderer to justice. I knew him to be a man of original resources, unscrupulous energy, bold expedients, and also, through his leadership of a wide-spread, secret organization of outlaws, of exceptional power. I therefore knew not how long I might escape his subtle and far-reaching vengeance, should I at once boldly announce the truth. I therefore decided to leave the general impression that I was the victim of his crime unaltered, until such time as I should consider it safe to denounce him."

"This was a great error," said the Court.

"I know that now. Mr. Sharp tried to convince me of it from the first, but, unfortunately for myself, I persisted."

Mr. Sharp resumed his questions:

"Whose was the strange voice that so startled the persons gathered at the inquest?"

"It was Hardman's—it must have been. He attended the inquest, I have been informed, and could easily have slipped into some empty rooms above mine, for the purpose of such a mystification. He must also have managed to assume his female garb there, in some way, for

a veiled figure in gray (which was certainly not mine nor Miss Whitback's) was seen running along the roofs during the alarm of fire in the Belgrade. He had likewise, it has been discovered, a small room in the top of the Caven-dish apartment-house, where Miss Whitback resides with her mother. There are many seeming inconsistencies in connection with the murder of my sister, and the subsequent strange flittings of Hardman disguised as the veiled woman in gray, which he alone can explain. If ever there was a devil incarnate he is that monster; so I much doubt if there is shame or honor enough in him to make any explanation."

She looked hard at Hardman, who, now fully repossessed of his original hardihood, merely returned her look with his inscrutable smile.

It was easy to see that the desired explanations, if dependent upon him, would never be made.

And it may as well be stated just here that they never were made. Regarding the more curious features of his connection with the Belgrade murder-mystery, those in which the curiosity of the public was naturally stimulated to the highest pitch, the Texan fiend remained close-lipped to the last.

The examination, as a matter of course, ended in Helen's immediate discharge from custody.

She was one of a group that hurried quickly away together, the others being Mrs. Whitback, Arabella Hanshaw, Willis Hawley, Harold Markoe and Lawyer Sharp.

Hardman was remanded to await the action of the Grand Jury.

CHAPTER XLVI.

"ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL."

Two months later, on the day before Christmas, there was a double fashionable wedding, in which Arabella Hanshaw and Willis Hawley, together with Helen Whitback and Harold Markoe, were united by the holy ties, which, according to the sacred ritual, no man dare put asunder.

A few hours after the ceremony, when the happy couples were gathered in Mrs. Whitback's little parlor, preparatory to setting forth on their wedding tours in each other's company, Mr. Sharp came bustling in to say good-by.

"I have some not altogether agreeable items of news for you to carry away with you," said he, after indulging in the customary congratulations.

"The sooner heard the better, then," said Harold. "Our united top cargo of felicity is so great with which we are about to start upon our *bon voyage*, that a little sober ballasting more or less can scarcely come amiss."

"That is true," asserted Willis.

"In the first place," said the old lawyer, "I have news that the last of the Brotherhood of the Scalp-Lock, rank and file, who were returned to Texas on requisition of the Governor of that State, has been lynched by an infuriated mob in the vicinity of Fort Worth."

The two brides turned pale, and Mrs. Whitback, who was to accompany the bridal party, looked very grave.

"*Requiescat in pace*," said Willis, with more cheerfulness and solemnity. "What next, Mr. Sharp?"

"Jefferson Hardman has cheated the gallows at last. Since his conviction and sentence, for the murder of Claudia, his wife, he had seemed to accept the inevitable with his customary iron resolution. At daybreak this morning he was found dead in his cell. It was a suicide, the particulars of which are awaited with interest; for the death-watch had been placed upon him, and how he could have found the opportunity for self-destruction is something of a mystery."

"He was a man to make opportunities," declared Harold, without a particle of rancor. "I am not sorry that the end has come in this way."

"Neither am I," added Willis. "Did he leave a written confession?"

"A very brief one, merely to the effect that he had murdered his wife, but without any particulars."

"Anything more?"

"Yes; regarding Cowby."

"Ah! But we all of us thought he would make trouble in the reformatory, to which he was committed."

"He will make no more trouble."

"Is the poor boy dead?"

"Yes; he was incorrigibly vicious, it would seem, from the first hour of his incarceration. He was secluded from the other young inmates for fear that he would corrupt the little good that might be remaining in them. Yesterday it was found that he had secreted a carpenter's adze in his cell. On the attempt being made to deprive him of it, he got possession of the weapon, and made a murderous assault on his keeper. In the struggle that ensued, the boy fell upon the sharp edge, and sustained an injury from which he speedily expired. His death is regarded with a general feeling of relief throughout the institution."

"I should say so," exclaimed Harold.

"There was one good spot in the poor boy's depravity," remarked Willis, thoughtfully.

"It must have been a very infinitesimal brightness."

"Perhaps so; but it was there."

"What was it?"

"He loved his mother."

And for the first time Willis recounted to them the little moonlight incident, where the boy had feelingly alluded to his bad mother's tragic death at the hands of the Sonora mob.

Mrs. Whitback looked sympathetic, while Helen and Arabella, softly clasping hands, looked at each other with glistening eyes.

"But I have one more piece of news for you," went on Mr. Sharp, cheerfully. "I have reserved it for the last, because it is less saddening than its predecessors—at least, I consider it so, though opinions may differ."

"What can it be?" demanded Harold, with anticipative eagerness. "Has Jeannette Golightly broken her neck?"

"Better or worse than that, according as one may be impressed. She is married!"

"Aha!"

"It was a runaway match."

"Good!" cried Willis. "The little widow was romantic, or nothing."

"Who is the unfortunate man?" asked Harold, dolefully.

"A sentimental hostler in a neighboring livery stable."

The ladies smiled, but the bridegrooms were preternaturally grave.

"She has shown some consideration for the feelings of fashionable society," remarked Willis, indulgently. "She might have run off with a hangman, you know."

"True," assented Harold. "But if it was only a hostler, why should an elopement have been considered necessary?"

"Ah!" answered Mr. Sharp, smiling, "there are some social difficulties of which none of you have any conception."

"What are they?"

"Well, it was Mrs. Golightly who ran off with the hostler, not the reverse, as would naturally be inferred."

"But why?"

"The young man's parents—poor but respectable sausage-peddlers—were bitterly opposed to the match."

"How could that be?" asked Willis. "The widow has an independent income."

"But also an unenviable notoriety, by reason of her connection with Hardman. It was too much for even the sausage people; they kicked, as the slang saying goes."

"God help the hostler!" ejaculated Willis, earnestly.

And then both he and Harold clasped hands with a congratulatory emphasis that caused the others to burst out laughing.

"But, enough of the past!" cried good old Mr. Sharp, with unaffected joyousness. "For you, at least, the future should henceforth be all in all. You, Helen, have achieved the heart and hand of an estimable young husband; and you, Willis, are in possession of a beautiful bride. Happiness enough for one Christmas Day, at least!"

"Still," remarked Willis, smilingly taking his wife's hand in his, "the past must endure while memory remains."

"Let it then endure," continued the old gentleman, gayly, "only in the effulgence that must forever linger about the name and deeds of the Rocket Detective!"

THE END.

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